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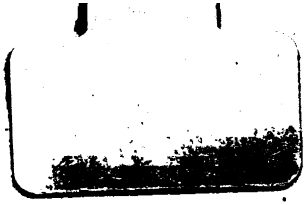

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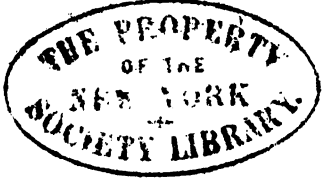

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GENTLEMAN UPCOTT'S DAUGHTER.

CHAPTER I.

LADY-DAY.

A PROCESSION of wagons was drawn up in the open space before "The Sparkford Inn." The old sign-board shone in the sun and shook in the March wind. Around the porch beneath clustered a wagoner and his boys. The host, having brought out a quart cup, stood by for a gossip. The wagoner drank deeply and seriously. Reflected. Drank again: then smiled wisely.

"Come vrom out round Cadbury, zumwhere, I'll goo bail."

"Zo did."

"Up top o' parish, or I be a vool."

"Did zo."

"Not a hunderd mile vrom zumwhere I do know."

"An' that's true."

"Ah!"

Words cannot describe the appreciation, both of self and cider, conveyed by that monosyllable breathed by a Somersetshire man as softly as a sigh. Then the cup was handed round.

"They do sweat, zim-zo," said the innkeeper, pointing to the cloud of steam rising from the foremost team.

"They've a come on," was the terse explanation.

"You'll find a change down where you're going."

"That's very true," replied the wagoner, fully recognizing that truth is never absolute, but relative. "That's zo true a word as ever you spoke."

"No. Ma'ston's not Lovi'ton."

"Not that."

The innkeeper, short and stout, wearing a sleeve waistcoat for warmth, but leaving the lower buttons open for coolness, placed his hands upon his hips, loitered up to the foremost wagon, and read aloud the name, painted in brown letters on a yellow ground :

EBENEZER UPCOTT, Lovington. 1821.

Well known were both wagon and owner, but being a scholar he read

omnivorously from real love of letters.

"Nor Lovi'ton wasn't North Cadbury. Eh?"

"An' that's no lie," assented the wagoner.

"'Tis a goodish stack o' things, though," said the innkeeper, glancing up at the load.

"Zo 'tis."

Needless to say, the wagons contained no agricultural crop. They were piled up with household furniture. Benches and stools, an old oak settle, bedsteads, bedding, and mysterious pieces incased in straw, reached high into the air. Legs of inverted tables, small and large, stuck out of the crazy pile in all directions, like almonds from a tipsy-cake. At the back stood an immense cask, around which passed ropes to steady the tottering superstructure.

"You zee," said the wagoner, winking crafty wisdom, "we put the girt zider-butt vor a steadyment. Do stand like Sturton tower, don't er?" Then conscientiously pouring the last drops from his cup upon the ground, he said "Good-day" to the host, "Mither way" to the horses, and proceeded on his road.

A couple of laborers had come from the inn, and stood watching the wagons out of sight.

"You zee, they put the girt zider butt vor a steadyment."

"A wondervul good plan. I wonder who thought o' that now?"

"He still got Cadbury on the little wold wagon," said another.

"I do suppwose they never had it altered."

So with tinkling of bells the teams went slowly on their way between high hedgerows, and beneath the branches of overhanging elms. Primroses were growing on the banks, buds were pushing on the branches. As they descended the knap above Queen Camel the air was sweet with violets, for the noonday sun shone on the side of the sheltered hollow. A sparrow, bent on matrimony and furnishing, was carrying away a straw robbed by a bough from some passing load.

"He's a-builden, I suppose," suggested a boy who rode beside the wagoner.

"You didden think *he* wur ridden house, did 'ee, young nog-head?"

Thus severely the carter, a man of position and experience, checked the frivolous conversation of youth, and they proceeded in silence.

Ridding house! What is this ridding house?

This pageant of wains—is it a triumphal progress, or a slow retreat

before advancing failure? The inscription on each wagon was a chapter in the life of Ebenezer Upcott, and as they lazily lumbered over the bridge across the brook, John Biddlecombe, white with meal, but inquisitive at the sound of wheels, thrust his head from the mill door, and remembered that Ebenezer owed him money. He doubted if the debt were safe, and with worldly wisdom natural to a miller was considering the propriety of dealing with Ebenezer in order to deduct the amount.

They stopped a minute at "The Cock," at Camel, where the carter had a pint while the others watched him. For this was not a question of thirst but luxury, and to let boys drink is a bad example. They established that in stability "the girt zider butt" was equal to Camel Hill, and then people rushed to their doors on either side of Camel Street to watch "Eb. Upcott's rottletraps" as they creaked and rattled on their way.

There was much conversation about Ebenezer that day. He had a family of daughters, and some said it was a pity, others that it was his own fault; not because they were many, for both sons and daughters were the gifts of God, and in those days were accepted without the cavil

and criticism of modern times. Yet however humbly we may bow to the wisdom of Providence in the distribution of the sexes, it cannot be denied that eight laughing, healthy, merry maidens make a good handful for any man. They may be sweet and beautiful like a bouquet, but lack the utility of a crop.

And times were bad, as they always have been, but even worse then than now; for Bonaparte, after trampling and tyrannizing over Europe, plotting it out like a flower garden, was beaten, dead, and buried; and Waterloo, glorious as it was, and a source of pride to every true-born Briton, had worked disastrous results on prices. They came down with a run, dragging many an old-fashioned farmer from the homestead of his fathers.

But Mr. Ebenezer Upcott was not old-fashioned. Some people in those parts considered him new-fangled, while others said he was stuck up. A vague rumor often expressed over the wood fire and cider cup allied him to the Upcotts of Exeter, and in those days men still cherished respect for high degree.

The relationship lost nothing by being so distant. Having established that Mr. Upcott was of good family, being connected with the Upcotts of

Exeter, it became easy to argue that the Upcotts of Exeter were well descended, being related to Ebenezer. On these considerations many traits in Ebenezer, although resented, were considered quite natural and explained away.

It was recognized also that Ebenezer was a man of wonderful discourse. He got at the rights of things; there was no mistake about that. Law, which presents difficulties to many minds, was to him a recreation, and divinity gave no trouble whatever. He possessed wonderful judgment, too, in respect of everything but his own business—a judgment which could point out when another man had done foolishly. If it did not help him much in the direction of his own affairs—well, what can you expect with eight daughters who cannot be put out?

The arts of millinery, drapery, and dressmaking, which provided a genteel livelihood for the girls even of the larger yeomen, were rightly repugnant to the "maidens of Gentleman Upcott," as they were sometimes described. Therefore from a sense of duty one went to live with her granny, another with a maiden aunt, while Sempronia, the eldest, resided with a distant relation, and kept the keys of everything, which makes a

great difference. By such arrangements they were distributed as blessings, and the family pride remained intact and uncompromised.

All but Ruth, who stayed at home. So pretty, so merry, and withal so mischievous that people wondered why she stayed so long. But Lovington was not Cadbury, and although the land at Marston Magna does not scour,[1] the holding was small, and neither Ebenezer's discourse nor mine can make it larger.

She was twenty, and tall as any girl should be; straight as the poplars skirting the churchyard; dark as the yew whose shadow fell upon the porch; and graceful as the willow bending over the village brook.

She was standing on the raised causeway at the corner waiting for the wagons. March winds are drying, the roads ran well, and it was a wonder that they did not come. Perhaps something had happened. In Ruth's experience something always did happen.

At last in the distance she espied the parlor table above the hedgerows, and presently the horses came nodding round a bend in the road, with John Sprackman walking at the leader's head. He saw her, and cracked his whip in enthusiasm for

work. The horses almost broke into a trot, the bells jingled more merrily. "Let Ma'ston volk zee how we do come into parish," thought John, and felt sure that Miss Ruth must be proud also.

"Take care, John ; take care."

He laughed, knowing well that in all Somersetshire there was not a better carter than John Sprackman.

But as they turned the corner in such capital style, the rope encircling the "girt zider butt" broke off "so short as a carrot." Nobody could have foreseen it ; and it is not to say that the wheel touched the curbstone, which it didn't, as the track remained "up two voot off" conclusively to prove. But the rope parted in the most unaccountable way ; John Sprackman supposed because it was "a bit woldish like." The parlor table fell down with a crash ; settle, benches, and chairs strewed the king's highway.

"Whoa ! Whoa, I tell 'ee. Come, stupid. Don't stand there wi' your thumb in your mouth. Catch hold o' Smiler, can't 'ee ?"

Then John Sprackman surveyed the universal wreck.

"It don't zim to ha' hurted the little one-laggèd milken stool," said he, affectionately picking up that primi-

tive property. "Nor the girt zider butt, you zee, he never moved. He stood so firm as Ma'ston Church, I'll warrant un. But what power 'ud Ma'ston Church have if all the volk had ha' left un? 'T'ood'n be his vault noo mwor 'un 'twas the girt zider butt's. I knowed must vall off if the rope wer' to break, but o' coose noo man liven cood'n zay."

Ruth looked upon this new disaster with awe. She was aware of the gradual decadence of the Upcott fortunes, the constant accidents, and the deep meaning in the dictum that Lovington was not Cadbury. Sometimes misfortune seemed so uncalled for, and always so unexpected, that she dreaded witchcraft; and wondered whether her father's ways (for that he had ways could not be denied) had offended anyone. Besides, witchcraft is mentioned in the Bible, therefore one must believe in it to some extent, and Ruth believed as little as could be expected of any intelligent, dark-eyed girl of those days. With a sigh she stepped into the road, and sorrowfully observed, as John Sprackman pointed out, that the head of the brass warming pan had "het in the belly o' the kitchen clock."

Just then a young man came cantering along the Rimpton road,

mounted on an old mare, unkempt, ungroomed, and held by a rusty bit and well worn rein. John deferentially touched his hat. There was no pretension about young George Biddlecombe of Camel. His coat was patched, his hat infirm in the crown, but the neighborhood respected him as a wonderful business man, and because his father, the miller, was warm. In those days frugality and patches kept a man warm.

George leapt to the ground, slipped his rein under the stirrup leather, and his little ground ash stick in the crupper strap, and left the mare to graze by the brookside.

"How d'ye do, Miss Upcott?" said he, shaking hands.

Then he glanced at the furniture and asked what was the matter.

"You see, the rope broke off like a baccy pipe. That's what 'twur, right enough," explained John Sprackman.

"Well, it isn't far to carry the traps, that's one thing," cried the sprightly young miller; and his good humor was so infectious that John Sprackman recognized it was better here than "in Camel Street, wi' all Camel volk gapèn," and Ruth admitted that worse accidents will happen at sea.

So they went to and fro like bees,

and at last carried the kitchen table between them; the miller walking backward at the head, and Ruth presiding at the foot of that festive board. Sometimes he looked over his shoulder to see where he was going, but for the most part gazed at Ruth, at first in a sheepish sort of way, but afterward with drollery glimmering in his blue eyes. Thus they crossed the little footbridge by the ford, passed the pound and village stocks, and entered the old farmhouse, somewhat retired from, but facing the highroad.

"A fine old place once," said he, glancing around with admiration.

But not now, thought poor Ruth, as her eye fell on the holes eaten by rats in the wainscoting.

"Have you been in the parlor?"

"No. But I've heard tell o' it," replied George, with brisk interest; and they entered that interesting chamber with its high oak paneling and a pageant of Scripture history on the walls. Beneath the lattice window was a seat let into a thick wall, and they sat a minute, one in each corner, to rest. The window was tall and narrow, the seat snug, and they looked like a young couple at the beginning of an old-fashioned courtship or the end of a modern dance.

Then one laughed, but not George.

And one blushed, but not Ruth. He drew a little closer, but she, being in a corner, could not withdraw, and he—well, *she* said, "Now, you dare, now." And the room being empty seemed to echo back, "Dare, now." And he did. He kissed her without comment or explanation, and she could not be very angry when he had just helped her to bring in the kitchen table.

At last with much *whoaing* and *wugging* John Sprackman brought his wagons through the brook and drew up before the garden hatch, where the lilac bush was green with buds. George Biddlecombe said he shouldn't so much mind lending a hand, and lent two with such good effect that when Mr. and Mrs. Upcott drove up in their yellow gig they found all the furniture deposited indoors, and the "girt zider butt" standing lonely as a lighthouse on a barren rock.

Yet Mr. Upcott was not pleased. Pleasure departs from life when one learns by experience that Lovington is not Cadbury. A somber light falls on the present, exaggerating even injuries befallen a kitchen clock. Clouds overhang the future, deepening the philosophy that things might be worse into the conviction that they will.

They alighted, one on either side of the yellow gig. He was tall, stout, and burley, wore top-boots and a long coat, and swayed slightly in his gait with an air of self-assertion. His complexion was what country people call fresh, his hair gray.

"There, you've left the rug behind," he said to his wife, as, whip in hand, he walked up the flagstone pathway in the garden of his new home.

"La ! then, and zo I have. And the little East Indee tea service wrapped in straw in a hair sieve under the seat, an' if John had only let down the shafts they mid all a slid out an' bin broke." Her husband's perception of her foolishness might be earlier, but never readier than her acquiescence in it. "Why, and there's grandfather's wold bowl that I put in the peck measure for safety—of course there is."

With these treasures concealed under the folds of her ample red cloak of West of England cloth, she glanced back at the gig, half-suspecting herself of having forgotten something else.

"Come, Eliza. Come. Don't stay about all day."

"Yes, Ebenezer. Coming now."

And as she hurried the cloak

spread out like the wings of a hen protecting chickens.

"Oh! young George Biddlecombe. *You* here? Pleased to see you, George Biddlecombe. Lending a hand, I suppose. Very much obliged, George Biddlecombe."

Truly there was more of aggression than grace even in the thanks of Gentleman Upcott.

"Master's very much obliged, George Biddlecombe," sweetly added Mrs. Upcott, acting as gratuitous interpreter of her husband's manner. She had already taken off her coal-scuttle bonnet and cloak, and, solicitous about the white silk lining, was carefully folding the hood. Her face possessed a Madonna-like symmetry and sweetness. Her hair was parted in the center of her forehead; her lips were compressed with constant smiles, which eddied away over her cheeks, and seemed to glimmer even through her lament.

"Oh! whoever did this to my poor wold kitchen clock. Why, zomebody must ha' zot on un when he wur down along-straight. Oh! my poor old kitchen clock, that kept such good time all these years, like the very zun itself."

"What's this? I say, what's this?" cried Mr. Upcott.

"Why, my kitchen clock."

"Don't talk nonsense, Eliza. I say, don't talk nonsense. I demand who did it."

There was silence. To answer seemed so much like striking a match in the vicinity of gunpowder.

"Were you fool enough to dance a hornpipe on that kitchen clock, George Biddlecombe?"

"No, father," cried Ruth indignantly. "It fell off the load."

George twirled his hat on his forefinger, and hoped the works might not be hurt much.

"Not hurt much? I say it is hurt much. Do you think I'll have a cracked thing standing in my place for a monument to other people's folly? It's spoilt. I say a man's a fool who says it's not spoilt."

George cleared his throat and shuffled with his feet and thought he had better be getting on now.

"Certainly, don't you stay. Don't you stay, George Biddlecombe. I'm much obliged, George Biddlecombe, much obliged," said Upcott, with condescension, and the young miller, after shaking hands all round, went about his business.

"Come, Ruth; come, Eliza; don't stand about," said Ebenezer, seating himself in the window sill.

"Yes, Ebenezer. In a minute, I'm sure."

How many follies had been committed that morning!

"Well, of all the foolishness I ever saw, none equals this," cried Mr. Upcott. "To bring things in and put 'em down all higgledy-piggledy. When you've got a thing in hand put it in place. Not make a heap in a hall as if you were haymaking. Where were your wits, Ruth? Wool gathering? I thought your mother had brought you up to more sense than to put things down to make two handlings. I wish Sempy was here. She's no fool, at any rate. I say, I wish Sempronia was here."

"'Twas a pity," pleaded Mrs. Upcott. "But I dare say 'twas young George. These young hands be too dapper for thought by half. You can't expect young heads to have your experience, Ebenezer."

"Then let them await my directions," cried he sententiously. "I don't know that I asked young George Biddlecombe to come making double work and——"

Can a kiss in springtime work such wonders? Can it touch the blood with flame and fire it into mutiny? warm the heart with gratitude and set it boiling over with generous impulse? For the first time in her life Ruth openly resented her father's arrogance.

"Well, he did his best. Our traps might ha' mended Marston road, and the cullender gone swimming down to Chilton if we'd waited till now."

To poor Mrs. Upcott there was impiety in such a retort. Impiety against her husband and against Providence who had sent Ruth so good a father. The smile which shone at Lovington, survived the injury to the kitchen clock, and twinkled in the dark room of their new home that day, went out. Not to succeed was misfortune. For Ruth to misbehave, disgrace.

"You don't seem improved by keeping his company," cried Mr. Upcott.

"Keeping his company, Ebenezer!" echoed his wife. For it had been said that George Biddlecombe kept running after Ruth; and he followed her with his eyes at evening parties.

But Ruth were already gone. "*I* keep company with George Biddlecombe?" The thought half frightened her. True, he had kissed her almost unrebuked. The recollection perhaps gave point to her father's unintentional insult, and stirred a deeper indignation. "*I* keep company with George Biddlecombe!"

CHAPTER II.

MILLER BIDDLECOMBE.

THIN, shaven face, small, quick eyes, and a mass of hair white with flour, age, and the cares of money-getting. How often it peered from the open upper half of the mill door that morning—when the wagons rumbled by; as the gig whirled past; and at last very frequently wondering at George's delay.

Miller Biddlecombe was crafty, yet none could impugn his justice. He was cross-grained, too, but with prudence, keeping an eye on the main chance, and perfect self-control where money was concerned. Crookedness both of mind and body made him critical of mankind. As the world drove by he stayed in his mill, like the philosopher in his tub, and muttered maxims shrewdly applicable to each passer.

"Ha! Ha! Gentleman Upcott. Who drives fast doesn't drive long."

But the leisurely yeoman jogging behind his old mare pleased him no better. "Ho! Ho! Wear out no wheels. It'll wait till *you* come."

But where could George be biding about? Gone only to Rimpton, and not back yet. The old man watched his son with a jealousy worthy of an elderly wife, worrying him, finding faults innumerable, and interfering with his most trivial actions. Yet, strangely enough, this crossness was the offspring of affection and pride. His shrewd gray eyes fell on the boy and brightened. He, stunted and misshapen, took credit for the young man's straight back and active limbs. They redeemed his own defect, proving it only accidental. Sometimes in his lonely moments within the mill he laughed, not with accustomed bitterness, but from sheer gayety to think that none of them possessed his son. Let all Somersetshire show a finer fellow than the hump-backed miller's boy. Thus in his heart he defied the world at which he sneered.

But affection has as many forms as life itself, and circumstances had almost covered the miller's tenderness with prickles. He grew gold like gorse—a mass of it, but not one petal to be picked. And at the root of each piercing shaft was love, could George but have got at it.

The clock in the church tower struck twelve.

By aid of a stick taller and more crooked than himself he walked down to the road and looked and listened. Not twenty lusty, lazy fellows should make him break through his daily custom. Back he turned to the old thatched house standing across the yard apart from the mill. A bundle of straw and a broom were by the door, and he carefully rubbed and brushed his boots before entering the kitchen.

A straight-backed settle stood on one side of the open hearth, an arm-chair covered with chintz on the other. A kettle was hanging in the chimney high above the meager embers of the morning fire. The old man swept and poked the dying coals together, from a sort of instinct that since they could not be saved they ought not to be wasted. Then, after placing a loaf and piece of cheese on the table, he took a cup from the dresser shelf, fetched his cider, put it on the hearth—not for warmth, but from force of habit—and seating himself in the high-backed chair, ate his lonely lunch, holding his cheese securely in the palm of his hand, and cutting his crust on his thumb with a clasp knife.

"Ha! Pretty thing, to take all

day to goo to Rimpton," he grumbled. Meanwhile George was cantering homeward on the sward by the roadside, the lark above his head, the blackbird rushing from the hedgerow as he passed.

Spring was not gayer than his heart.

At feasts and parties he had long while watched Ruth Upcott, never speaking through lack of subtle phrase, for early love must be conveyed delicately, like eggs or mushroom. Her beauty had often made him sigh. Her father's gentility kept him silent. He, the rollicking miller's son, whose jokes and high spirits sometimes kept company roaring louder than a yuletide fire, had found never a word to say, and yet—he blushed at his own audacity, and it seemed almost criminal. Then he laughed at his courage, and gloried that, come what may, he had kissed Ruth Upcott.

Thrice his thoughts wandered a-field. Once gladly to notice how the grass was coming on; once to see a little ground "most wonderful snake-pipey"; and lastly, to predict that the old man would be pretty sour and surly. Thus he cantered home to Camel Mill.

Old Biddlecombe did not turn his head as George entered, but leaning

forward on his chair hovering over the ashes, laughed derisively.

"Ha! ha! A mile a hour. A mile a hour 'ull win noo race. Man an' hoss half a day vor two mile. Perty work. Perty work."

"Ebenezer Upcott's traps were turned out in road, and I stopped to help."

"Ha! ha! I zaw un go by. Ten mile an hour—a hour an' half late. He didden catch the vallen load. Not he. I'll warrent un. Serve un right. Perty management, indeed. Dree load o' traps an' noo' eye upon 'em."

The old man's malignity jarred on George. Ebenezer Upcott was nothing to him, yet he could not quell a spirit of contradiction.

"Yes; Miss Ruth was there."

"Ha! ha! A perty piece. What good's a wench except to hinder some young chap, as she did you—as she did you, zimmy-zoo."

The miller turned suddenly and glanced at his son. Beneath his ragged brow gleamed a look of searching inquiry. George, having thrown his hat upon a chair, was standing by the table cutting his lunch. The high back of the old brown oak settle, the black beam across the dingy ceiling, and the dresser of unpainted wood formed

a sort of frame around his stalwart figure, on which the light streamed through the open window. Spring seemed to add warmth to his brown hair, and stronger beauty to his ruddy face, clean-shaven like his father's, after the fashion of those days. There was picturesqueness and color about the dark patch on his rusty green coat, and something manly about the mud on his leather gaiters.

The old man's stare became piercing as an auger. What experience had life vouchsafed to this misshapen piece of humanity that he could look so deeply into the hearts of men and things? What passion could have taught such quick detection of incipient love? He continued with bitterness so biting that George well knew the application of each word.

"Ha! What's she? She's nobody. A peck o' pride—a zack o' sorrow. A pair o' fine hands an' noo money. Vor what wer' zunk at Cadbury wer' never zaved at Lovi'ton, nor wun't be picked up in Ma'ston gutter. An' Gentleman Upcott, what's he? He'll come to grief an' never know the meanen o' it. He'll never learn the neature ov life, I tell 'ee, an' then want 'ull make a bigger vool o' un. An'

then what have his maidens got? A bit o' hair so black as a snag, a yallow-pink cheek like a honeysuck, an' a pair o' warm lips. But that can't last. That do all drop off wi' the fall. An' poverty's bare, I tell 'ee. Poverty's bare. An' vanity's clothes a wore out in fine weather be in holes avore winter. Ha! ha!"

The manner was even more irritating than the meaning of these words; it was so bitter in its fierce scorn. It seemed to deride the beauty of human life, to accuse George because of follies imputed to the Upcotts; and at one-and-twenty one hates derision, and is not hard on folly.

"What have you got agen 'em? You never spoke to ar'n o' 'em in your life but Ebenezer. You never saw any o' 'em close handy."

There are drawbacks about living with a village Thersites in a little mill; and George, feeling this keenly, spoke with a heat so unexpected that the old man rose from his chair in indignation.

"Ha! ha! They shan't goo in finery wi' my money. Let Ebenezer come and pay my bill. That's all I do want, I tell 'ee. Let un show the color ov his money overdue. Let un come avore I do zend vor un. Let un come. Let un come avore——"

His words were shrill with excitement, but the torrent of his anger suddenly stopped, for lo! as if obedient to the summons, the yellow gig rattled into the yard and pulled up before the door.

"Miller Biddlecombe at home? I say, is Miller Biddlecombe at home?" shouted a boisterous voice, and receiving an affirmative reply, Upcott, uninvited, entered the house. "Just walk my horse up and down a minute, George. He's warm. I say, he's warm. I want just a word with your father. Just one word."

The miller had completely changed. No longer ill-tempered, he smiled fawningly upon his visitor.

"Ha! ha! I thought you'd be looking in. I said to George, passing so often Mr. Upcott'll sure to look in and pay that little account. Take the chair, Mr. Upcott—now do take the chair."

The greeting disturbed Gentleman Upcott. Evidently ill at ease, he took the proffered seat. The miller glanced at the inconvenient settle, and remained standing.

"I'll vetch pen an' ink. We shall want it vor the receipt, shan't we?"

"Don't trouble, Mr. Biddlecombe," said Upcott quickly. "I'll call and pay you in a few days, but

I came on another errand this afternoon."

The old man turned, and steadying himself with one hand on the table, looked keenly at his guest. Ebenezer's self-assurance melted. Pecuniary instability seemed indicated in his hesitating voice.

"We—we've done business some years, Mr. Biddlecombe, and I know you, and—and you know me. I looked in—in fact, I called, to ask a little favor. Times are bad; never worse, I should think. There is nothing to be done, I say—there is nothing to be done at present prices; in fact, I myself am going into a smaller way of business for the present. It's wiser, I say—it's wiser when it's ruination to sell, and there's no money to buy. And, well—I'm a little pushed—and there's the pull of house-ridding. And I thought perhaps you'd let me have a small matter of fifteen pound for a fortnight, say, as an accommodation."

"Ha! ha! Oh, yes. I know you. I know you well enough," assented Biddlecombe, contemplating his guest with a strange smile, which Upcott received as approbation.

How well he knew this man! his empty futility and vain pretensions. And Miller Biddlecombe hated a

fool with all the nervous intensity of a quick apprehension. His first impulse was to refuse, for the money must certainly be lost. He was too sagacious not to recognize that; and there would be pleasure in the refusal. But the altercation with George was fresh in his mind, and his heart cherished a deeper vindictiveness against Upcott and all his tribe. At once he realized the power of money—the money which had never yet purchased him a pleasure.

"We shall want pen and ink after all, zimmy-zo," he said quietly, as he hobbled off in search of them.

The readiness with which his request had been granted restored Gentleman Upcott's self-possession. Frequent changes damage a man's reputation; but while money can be had for the asking, credit is evidently unimpaired. When old Biddlecombe came back with bottle and quill, Upcott spoke in his usual lordly manner. "You take your own chair, Mr. Biddlecombe. I say, you take your own chair."

The miller did so, and drew up to the table. Then he slowly adjusted his spectacles, and carefully uncorked his ink. This sitting down to write was a ceremony.

"I've got a vew rules o' my own, Mr. Upcott. A vew maxims, so to

speak. I don't like accounts to run. 'Tis like a spannel dog: you mid whistle vor your money if you don't call it in betimes. You shall have what you do want, and a vew pound more to pay my bill. He! he! That's my rule. To have bills paid. You said a fortnight. But zay Cary Fair. That's longer. Zay, the first o' May. How'll that do, Mr. Upcott, zur?"

"Certainly, certainly; say Cary Fair," conceded Ebenezer in the airy tone of a man to whom both saying and doing are the easiest matters in the world. The miller slowly drew up a document, rounding each letter with affectionate care, as if it were a coin of the realm, and Ebenezer signed his name with a bold hand and a flourish at the tail.

Then Biddlecombe drew a bag from his pocket and told the money out in gold upon the table.

"Ha! ha! You'd better zee it's right, vive-and-twenty poun'," he almost shrieked, "An' then you can pay back my bill." Thus the outstanding debt was settled: the miller's maxim suffered no outrage and Ebenezer was ready to depart.

"Stop one minute, Mr. Upcott. Young eyes be sharp, and tongues do run like vire. Ha! ha! ha!"

He buttoned the document in his breeches pocket, and hid a stray piece of paper under his chair. He brought an account book from the dresser cupboard and laid it on the table beside the coins, making a great mystery over a very small matter. "Zend in George, Mr. Upcott, will 'ee, please?"

"Thank ye, George. I say, thank ye. Your father wants you, George," bellowed Upcott, as he mounted the gig and drove away.

When George entered, the old man was smoking his pipe and seemed quite placable.

"Mark off Ebenezer Upcott's account, George. Count over the money there. He wanted to run on, but I made un pay up. He'll come to nothen as sure as a gun. He's a gwaine there straight enough. Eight maidens an' not a penny piece among 'em. Not a varden. Ha! ha!"

So George crossed off the entries after the manner of those days. He felt glad. The debt being paid, his father's constant criticisms must cease. Nor was the picture of Ruth penniless so very pitiable. It seemed to bring her closer to him.

That evening, after dark, father and son were sitting together by the hearth. The wood fire lit up the room and shone upon their faces.

The old man, holding his hands toward the warmth, was thoughtful and silent. At last he said :

"I be getting wold, George, an' zome day you'll vind a maid to your mind an' marry. Then I'll gie up the mill an' go into the cottage. But I'll tell 'ee a vew maxims. Don't 'ee wed too young or you'll repent wi' the growth o' wisdom. And don't 'ee wait to be wold or you'll be overwise to agree. An' don't 'ee wed where there's many or oone'll come to beg o' 'ee. Nor 'eet where there's but oone, for she got a tert temper. An' George, mind this, a vortune a parted is noo vortune at all, vor ten poun' in a crock is mwore than eighty divided by nine. But none o' your Upcotts, George. Why, he's under water already, and one fine day somebody'll push un down. You can do better than that. You mid pick an' choose ; I tell 'ee, you mid pick an' choose."

But George, too wise to answer, sat staring upon the burning sticks.

CHAPTER III.

ALL FOOL'S DAY.

PRECISELY a week elapsed and the Upcotts were settled in their new home. The kitchen clock, disfigured truly, but with soul unimpaired, ticked deliberately in the hall. The remainder of the furniture had been adjusted to the satisfaction even of Ebenezer.

The front door was open. So was the back. Thus the passers-by could look through the wide passage into a kitchen garden; could see the clothes line with various garments waving in the wind like flags on a gala day, and the milk pails by the path, now empty, but handy for use.

And there stood Ruth in a print dress with upturned sleeves, staring into the air; and Mrs. Upcott, shading her eyes with her hand, her placid face puckered with perplexity. On a trestle behind them stood Ebenezer, his head elevated out of sight, but from the tiptoeing of the top-boots it was evident that he was staring also.

People do not stand thus for nothing, even on April morning. No passer, with eyes in his head and a heart in his bosom, could fail to see them or to ask the question, "What *can* be the matter?"

And George, on his way to Adber. stopped a minute, for staring is infectious, and he caught it from Ruth. Presently it occurred to him that if anything was "going on" too difficult for three people to encompass, he might just lend a hand. So, uninvited, he walked through the house.

"Ho! ho! George Biddlecombe," cried Ebenezer.

"How d'ye do, George Biddlecombe?" purred Mrs. Upcott.

"Good-morning, Mr. Biddlecombe," said Ruth, and her cheek slightly ripened as she tossed her head, probably to continue her investigations.

Nothing was going on but time; and they were all looking at the sundial on the gable, with its quaintly spelt motto almost obliterated.

"It's gone out. I say, it's gone out," cried Upcott abruptly. "*I* can't read it."

"Yes, I do expect 'tis gone out," echoed his wife, smiling pleasantly to find so easy a solution of the difficulty.

"You do want the little ladder," suggested George.

"Why, and zo we do, to be sure," admitted Mrs. Upcott.

"That's no good. I say, that's no good. It's gone out."

But George, having found a ladder against the garden wall, brought and raised it upside down, because several rungs were missing from the bottom. Then he mounted and read:

AS SHADOWE, SO MAN SPEEDOTH.

"Ho! ho! Is that all," shouted Ebenezer, contemptuous of the past, which spelt trite wisdom badly.

"But we do like to know," softly murmured Mrs. Upcott.

"A goodish place this, once," said George.

"Ha! George Biddlecombe, and you'll see a change before I've been here long, *I* can tell you."

"Yes, you may be sure there'll be a change before Ebenezer's in a place long," corroborated Mrs. Upcott in simple loyalty to her good man.

Her praise pleased him, and modified the condemnation of waste of time, which immediately followed.

"Well, well; come, come. Standing about all day. Come, Ruth; you know you've got to go to Adber."

To go to Adber! The words fell on George's heart like an April shower around a tuberous root, and Love started like something herba-

ceous which grows quickly. He could scarcely find words to wish them good-morning. He—well, he supposed he must be getting on—and went.

There are two ways to Adber; and two ways, whether in Life or Love, are quite sufficient to create a difficulty. Mathematically, the betting is even; morally, it is ten to one a man goes wrong. And if he do but sit on a stile and reflect, the whole neighborhood wonders whether he is going to borrow or lend money on the adjoining property.

While George stood hesitating in the highway to his indecision was added a doubt. Her greeting had been cold and distant. Perhaps a walk to Adber would be going a little too far. But no man on earth can help meeting a pretty girl on a public footpath if she comes that way. No blame attaches to that. And while he was deliberating Ruth tripped down the lane which enters the high-road behind the village church.

Her toilet had taken little time. A garden bonnet on her head, a red silk kerchief folded over her throat, a small basket on her arm. Thus was she equipped, but not all nature in springtime could show a fresher, brighter thing than Ruth, on a path paved with Keinton stone, and sheltered by the crumbling lichen-covered

wall. The quiet background added to the vivid beauty of her bright eyes and glowing cheeks. There was nothing like it in the landscape; for only homely flowers face the wind and rain, while gay ones withhold their passionate warmth for summer. And Ruth moved with the grace of youth unbroken to sorrow, and the light joy which makes of movement an abounding pleasure.

She was fancy free, which means that she was full of fancies and free to indulge in them. And she did. Wild visions and generous impulses inhabited the transparent depths of her soul in shoals. In her heart was nothing hidden, neither the romance nor the caprice, and, least of all, the mad intolerance of meanness which people mistook for giddiness when they called her harum-scarum. As she walked she looked upon the ground, being busy with her thoughts. A penny for them, Ruth, a penny. Would they adorned this page, fresh and sweet as the early cowslip budding in the meadow.

Seeing George, she looked conscious, perhaps remembering his recent kiss; and he, confused, feeling guilty of having waylaid her. Neither possessed address to conceal abashment, and thus they became compromised by their own blushes.

"I thought—I thought perhaps you didn't know the short cut."

"Oh! The highroad does for me, thank you."

"Not but what *I* like the high-road myself."

"Though I suppose the short cut *is* quicker."

"'Tis that," said George, after grave deliberation.

They wisely entered the meadows where the path goes parallel to the hedgerow, and a rough plank of elm serves as a bridge over the gully.

"Things be wonderful for'ard," began George briskly.

"I suppose 'tis the season," she replied, with quick perception of cause and effect.

"'Ithout doubt."

They had reached a stone stile, and by aid of his hand she stepped upon the top, and alighted on the other side. A magpie arose close by and flew across the path.

"Bad luck!" she cried, affecting disbelief in a superstition she scarcely dared deny. "Now I suppose my sitting o' turkey eggs'll all be addled."

"There's nothing in that."

"Well, all I know is, when father went to look at Lovington, he met one magpie, and the very same day two little sparkèd cows and the donkey died with eating yew leaf.

So it shows things do happen whether or no."

Before George could combat this conclusive argument, two more flying magpies averted the omen from mourning into marriage.

"Well, now. That's better," he said.

"Lo! That might be the worst luck of all."

Budding hedgerows were high on every side. Patches of blue sky peered through the April clouds, and birds were busy with mating and melody. Yet George could find no courage before a retort so pregnant with truth that it defied contradiction. There was no mirth now in their conversation. None of the half-romping gayety which accompanied the salvation of the furniture. She would not even look at him; but walked intent on the grasses at her feet, thinking, perhaps, of the many disasters which shipwrecked matrimony.

"Well, I hope you'll have luck to year wi' your turkeys, I'm sure; or wi' anything else, for the matter o' that." But even good wishes were a failure, and George felt that an opportunity had fallen flat.

As he held open the gate into the highroad their eyes met. She was safe now, and, laughing at him, held out her hand to say good-day.

"But you'll have to go back," he cried, eager to express his love now that it was too late.

"Very likely I might stay about."

"But I'd wait. I'd wait till midnight."

"I couldn't think of it."

"And I can't help thinking about it, Ruth."

There was something pathetic if not hopeless in the admission; yet it filled her with strange exultation. In springtime Love is sweet. Whether you will pluck it or no the first primrose is a promise of gayer flowers in store.

She tossed her head. "I don't believe that," said rosy lips which belied her heart.

"It's no lie," he said emphatically, "if it was the last word I had to speak. I cannot help loving the very ground you tread on."

"There's no objection to that," she said gayly, and he felt put down.

Then from the distance came the sound of a horse's feet beating a smart trot on the hard spring road. Her mirth ceased. "Here's father," she said, and the words seemed a presentiment of evil.

But Gentleman Upcott's face was all smiles and excitement. His errand was so important that he could not wait, but shouted as he

passed, "Come, Ruth. Come. Your Uncle Granger is up at Simon Sly's. Don't be wasting half the day."

So she said good-by to George, and hurried to the little dairy farm to fetch the turkey eggs.

Her father's horse was tied to the railings before the homestead. From somewhere beneath the old thatched roof came her father's voice raised in violent indignation.

"Then where is Mr. Granger?"

"I don't know, Mr. Upcott; I don't know."

"But I was sent for. I say, I was sent for."

"Not by we, Mr. Upcott; not by we."

"Then who was it? I demand, who was it?"

"I know no more than the babe unborn," protested the dairyman. "Unless 'twas zumbody a-maken, o' 'ee a April vool. 'Tis the first o' April, Mr. Upcott, you zee."

Mr. Upcott saw it all. He, Ebenezer Upcott, had been made an April fool. Some young idiot with no respect for age or position had taken this egregious liberty. The miller's wagon left the message. Why, it was as clear as day. This must be one of young George Biddlecombe's pranks. All the countryside knew he was full of them.

"Then I'll tell you," cried Eben-

ezer. "'Twas George Biddlecombe. That's who 'twas. Or what was he out here in the road for? A fine sight to see me ride up, I dare say. I say, a fine sight." Turning toward the door he saw Ruth. "And what did you want out there talking to him? Have you combined to make your father an April fool? What does a daughter o' mine want speaking to such a fellow as that. He's not a fit companion for a daughter o' mine."

"Well, there. 'Tis the first o' April, Mr. Upcott," said the dairyman, but the explanation brought no salve to Ebenezer's wounded vanity.

"A joke's a joke. I say a joke's a joke," he shouted. But a joke is never a good joke unless perpetrated on somebody else.

Gentleman Upcott mounted his horse and rode off, and Ruth, with the eggs in her basket, presently followed him.

Ashamed of her father's exhibition of violence she hurried homeward, not venturing to cross the fields lest Biddlecombe might be waiting for her. She was angry too. It was so unjust. How could she help his walking with her to Adber? The public footpath is free and he had his own mind to use. And to be so foolish, too, before a dairyman, making everyone ridiculous. It was enough

to make her hate her home. Indeed, she should talk to George Biddlecombe if she liked.

Filled with impatience she walked quickly and soon reached the corner where three elms once stood as a sort of landmark. To her dismay George was standing there engaged in altercation with her father.

"You did. I say, you did. I don't believe it. I say, I don't believe it. You came up here on purpose to see me pass. You don't pretend to have an errand up here. Then what did you come up here for? 'Twas your carter left word, and that proves it. I say, that proves it. And I've got a good mind to lay my whip about your back."

Even the respect due to the father of Ruth was insufficient to overcome the young man's indignation.

"If you were a man of my own age I'd knock you off your horse pretty quick," he retorted. It was no threat but an explanation of forbearance which under other circumstances might be unmanly.

"You threaten me on the king's highway. I'll have the law of you, I will." Then, losing self-restraint, he raised his whip and struck George on the shoulder.

A cry of astonishment, and they looked round to see Ruth close by

them. Perhaps her presence brought safety to Gentleman Upcott, for George stood one moment undecided, then turned and walked away.

"And what are you doing here? You're my witness. You heard him say he'd knock me off my horse."

Too frightened to reply, Ruth hurried past her father, who presently opened a gate and entered one of his fields. She saw the sheep gallop away in a flock as he rode across ten-acres.

In the lane by the church she met her mother coming in great haste, an apron over her head, and shading her eyes with her hand. The good soul peered and peeped in all directions between the trunks of trees growing in the hedgerows. Her placid face was ruffled. But sorrow brought no storm to her sweet maternal nature. Only a soft melancholy like a west wind sighing and moaning among mountains.

"Oh, Ruth dear. Where-ever is your father? I *have* been zo voolish. Why of course it was at Zolomon Sly's at Rimpton that your uncle Granger was. And I really do believe I zaid Zimon. No doubt I did zay Zimon, because your father's gone there. And I might ha' known, because the wagon came on from Rimpton, an' that proves it. And

your father'll be so angry. And perhaps your Uncle Granger can't wait. And that'll be such a pity, because he's so particular, and the only uncle I've got, and in such bad health too, which makes such a difference. Where is your father? Could 'ee find your father, child?"

"No. I couldn't, mother."

"Why, what's the matter, maid?"

The girl's bosom was heaving, her lips quivering. She could scarcely find words to speak.

"I knew George Biddlecombe didn't do it. Why, he helped us with the furniture, and—and—and all."

Ruth stopped. The word was comprehensive, but no one knew that it embraced a kiss. "I shall go out, mother. Nelly, or Sally, or Jinny, or Sempy would just as zoon be home. I would rather be out. And such wild sayings, and to come to blows——"

"Blows, child?"

"Yes. Father hit him."

The words were more than history; they were an accusation.

"Ruth," said her mother, and her eyes looked like April—a cloud of doubt overhanging the wisdom, and a gleam of hope brightening the romance of it, "you an' George beän't a thinken o' each other, be ye?"

"I don't know," said the girl, and,

opening a door in the wall, she entered the kitchen garden.

The window of her bedroom looked out upon the road.

"Mother!" she presently cried, "its all right. There's Uncle Granger driving through the brook in his little low trap."

Mrs. Upcott, all smiles, ran out to welcome her important relative. John Sprackman led away the pony and cart, but Ruth still remained upstairs. She wished to be alone, and stood looking out of the window. Presently she withdrew hastily as a tall figure came in sight on the road. Peeping from behind the curtain, she watched him pass; but George did not even glance at the house. At that moment she would have given the world to disassociate herself from her father's conduct. She put her head out of the window to watch him out of sight He was so tall and manly, so bold in physique, yet so easily disconcerted; she could not help liking even when she laughed at him. And now the laughter was dispelled, and only the liking remained. Suddenly he looked round, and her heart beat fast. How could it happen to a girl so proud and shy? The action was impulsive—almost automatical. In an outburst of generosity, she—she kissed her hand to him.

CHAPTER IV.

UNCLE GRANGER.

IF man ever deserved to be fêted by his family, so did Uncle Granger. Money, judgment, and a genius for dealing were his; also quiet mirth and a suppressed gout, which at any moment might fly to his stomach. Would that you, that I, that all the world possessed so exemplary a bachelor uncle in such comfortable circumstances.

Besides being Ruth's great-uncle, he was a great man, having land both let and in hand; and infinite was the number of men he could "buy up." Nature and Fortune had been so prodigal that he was scant of nothing but breath. In age he was "well on in the zixties." In weight, estimated by the standard used for the valuation of bullocks, he was wont to speak of himself as "up vourteen score." For these reasons

he could not walk much; and for short distances he used to waddle. Yet many people questioned whether it was so much his weight, after all, as some sort of weakness which "had het into his huckle-bones." Perhaps a chill caught riding in the little low cart, which really did shake Uncle Granger a goodish bit.

In one respect he resembled his niece, Mrs. Upcott. Nothing perturbed him. He was the most contented man alive. With a long pipe, and a drop of cider or gin and water "just to moisten the clay"—for human clay cannot endure dryness—he loved to sit for hours, and jest and laugh, and hear the same story over again.

His most remote relations loved him, and as he never displayed partiality unimpaired hope sustained them all. What Uncle Granger would do in the event of being suddenly called upon to make deposition by will became a central problem of Life, competing with free will, free grace, good works, or any combination of these; but relatives rallied round one central faith, that when Uncle Granger should be taken it would be seen that he had done right. Thus, as in a game of chance, interest never flagged. Every relative played his best. One out of compliment

claimed to "take after" Uncle Granger in the matter of weak huckle-bones, and imitation is surely the sincerest form of flattery. Another sent him tracts, hoping to touch Uncle Granger's heart with doctrinal truth, and establish sympathy through similarity of spiritual experience. Therefore an air of holiday followed him. In his presence cupboards containing skeletons were kept locked, and pantries yielded their most sacred pastries. Mrs. Upcott took out one of the puddings kept over from Christmas against sheep-shearing, and cooked the little leg of mutton hanging for Sunday.

"Do 'ee zit down, Uncle Granger," she said, with sweet solicitude.

"I must, out o' love vor my knees. 'Tis the only way I can zee 'em," replied Uncle Granger.

He sat with his hands crossed on the handle of his stick, an attitude which did much to support his reputation for wonderful sense. You could rarely guess his thoughts, and he never disclosed them; but doubt sometimes agitated the relatives as to whether Uncle Granger seemingly absorbed might not in reality be absorbing. Anxious ~~to~~ nicely adjust their conduct, they complained that no one could really tell what Uncle Granger did think. "But he do zee

all," they agreed, and this sphinx-like appearance of profundity, with money in the bank, begot much deference. In his presence even Ebenezer softened his manners, becoming not less dogmatic, but more considerate.

"I call a man a fool who says otherwise. What do you say, Uncle Granger?"

"Why here is Ebenezer!" said Mrs. Upcott, congratulating both herself and her guest.

"Well done, Uncle Granger. This is good for sore eyes. I say, it's good for sore eyes to see you here. It's not all could be wished at present. But there's welcome. I say, there's welcome. But I've been made a fool of. I've been sent on a fool's errand." And as vanity cannot keep counsel, Ebenezer gave his version of the morning's adventure.

"And it was Zolomon Sly's, after all," explained Mrs. Upcott.

"Solomon's? I was told Simon's. I repeat, I was told Simon's."

"And I zenden an' worritten to think you'd gone wrong."

"I gone wrong! I never went wrong. I went where I was told. I say, I went where I was told."

"And I suppwose I told 'ee wrong. I really suppwose I did."

"Not that. I don't believe it. I affirm I've been made a fool of first

and then threatened on the king's highway. And I'm not the man to stand that sort of thing from a fellow like George Biddlecombe. I'll summon him. I'll indict him. I'll—I'll —I'll impeach him. And I dare any one here to speak to him again. Ruth's my witness. Where's Ruth? I say, where's Ruth? Ruth! Ruth!"

To Mrs. Upcott's doubt as to what Uncle Granger might be thinking, was added a misgiving as to what Uncle Granger *would* think.

"La! Ebenezer. The maid's a changen' her vrock. There, do 'ee zit down."

But when at last Ruth appeared, matters were not mended. A tragedy was written on her face; her eyes flashed indignation, and rebellion was in her gait. Uncle Granger, shaking hands, knuckles upward, thought her a very pretty maid.

"You heard what he said. I say, you heard what he said," cried her father. "You're not to speak to that young man again."

"Because you find he did not make you an April fool?"

"Ruth!" moaned her mother.

Uncle Granger chuckled approvingly. He was fond of cockfighting, and admired gameness, even in a pullet.

"There shall be no nonsense where I am. I say, I'll have no nonsense under my roof."

"I—I'd rather go out."

"By all means. I say, by all means. We'll have no compulsion here—no compulsion here," cried Upcott in his most tyrannous tone.

Ruth had no reply but tears.

"There! there!" cooed Mrs. Upcott. "Do let's be happy, and get dinner to once." Thus for a time the difficulty was conveniently smothered in hospitality.

But to half a century's silent accumulation of wisdom and experience, the recent winter had added in Uncle Granger's mind a definite practical idea—an idea which got uppermost, and drove the little low two-wheel to Marston that morning. He watched attentively while Ruth laid the cloth and set the dishes with her neat hand.

"A 'ooman," he said solemnly, "is a wonderful handy thing in a house."

It is a proposition which no woman dare dispute, yet alarm overcame Mrs. Upcott's habitual smile. Half the revolutionary doctrines which distress the present age are harmless except in application. A wonderful handy woman often destroys the hopes and upsets the calculations of a whole family.

"How's Mrs. Toop?" she asked.

"The wold quaddle," replied Uncle Granger vindictively.

"There, you do want one o' your own kin—not a wold body like she."

"Have me for housekeeper, Uncle Granger," cried Ruth, putting her hand on the old man's shoulder.

"Tut, tut. We should zoon hear wedden bells if I can read right. I don't want the parish put by the ears. We don't want to mend the parish roads wi' broken hearts. But what 'ud 'ee want?" he asked, with the craft of an old bargain maker.

"I'd come for clothes an' keep, Uncle Granger."

"Done!" he cried, and shook hands as if consummating the sale of a bullock.

"But not to be under Mrs. Toop," demurred her mother.

"No, no."

"Nor yet to be picken anybody out of their place."

"No, no."

"She'll go on a visit. I say, she can only go on a long visit," cried Ebenezer.

And so the thing was settled to everybody's satisfaction. Mrs. Upcott smiled more sweetly than ever in exultation at having upset the calculations of Uncle Granger's imaginary woman. Ebenezer was

pleased too; for not only is it a good thing to keep a member of the family always under the eye of a rich relative, but it costs less than living at home.

Ruth was for going that day. "Then I'll pack my Sunday things at once, and——"

But Uncle Granger shook his head. He seemed to suffer some sort of moral qualm as he said slowly, "But perhaps I'd better to mention it to Mrs. Toop first. What do you think, Eliza?"

"Whatever *you* think, Uncle Granger."

"Then what if we were to say this day week."

So with perfect unanimity they said this day week.

CHAPTER V.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON A LEGHORN HAT.

THE week passed quite slowly, heavily indeed, in spite of the sweet April weather; for something like a sigh hung around Ruth Upcott's heart and oppressed her thoughts. She was not in love, not a bit of it. That was what made it so strange that she must keep thinking of George Biddlecombe. But the thoughts would arise with the persistency of April clouds, some ominous and gloomy as her father's quarrel, some white as silver or a bridal robe, and the others a little of each, like the magpies in the Adber meadow. But he never came that way, or, if so, she did not see him. And in her moments of leisure she sat in the window, too, trimming a Leghorn hat.

When the day arrived for her departure, Uncle Granger was so late that she began to fear he had forgotten her. But toward evening he

came, drank a glass of gin and water without alighting from the little low cart, and was ready to start at once. It was only a mile to Rimpton.

Uncle Granger's house was unpretentious and homely. A group of ragged pines in the home field imparted a certain dignity to the place, but the low, thatched roof, with its snug dormer windows, was almost hidden in dark orchards. It stood remote from the road, being approached by a sort of drove across a couple of fields. A gander and two geese gabbled and hissed as the little low cart jolted among the deep ruts. Three magpies flew out of the pine trees as they passed.

The homestead was inclosed in a fence of blue Keinton stone. An old grapevine trained over the porch and around the mullioned windows covered the front, and nests of last year's swallows still adhered to the overhanging eaves, in which sparrows had made innumerable holes. The oaken door, studded with large-headed nails, stood open with habitual hospitality; but the little garden hatch, padlocked to keep out pigs, precluded entrance by that way. In the garden was Mrs. Toop.

"There! that's how she do bide an' spuddle about," said Uncle Granger contemptuously.

The "wold quaddle" was making excavations in a flower border with a trowel. As they drove past she nodded grimly to the visitor. Quite apart from a certain jealousy of Ruth's presence, Mrs. Toop found no enjoyment in the society of young, flighty girls.

"Young George Biddlecombe's been here about the meal. He's just gone down in village; he'll be back in a minute," piped her shrill voice.

At the mention of his name Ruth Upcott trembled and blushed so deeply that she could not hide her confusion. She had been wanting to see him, yet now she felt impatiently that the man and the magpies were present at every turn she took. Fate seemed to encompass her, but she did not know her own mind, and felt afraid. Before she had time to recover there he was, holding open the orchard gate for the little low trap to pass through. He looked quite merry, and the evening sun shone on his rosy face through the dark branches of an apple tree.

"Walk in, George. Walk in with Miss Upcott," cried Uncle Granger.

"Thank you; I won't stay," said George, more for manners than meaning. "Unless I could help in the little box." And, seizing it without more ado, he carried the

paper-covered trunk through the dairy into the house. Uncle Granger drove round to the stable. Ruth, George, and the trunk went into the kitchen. The dusk was creeping over Corton Hill ; but the bright rays of the fire, recently made up to boil the kettle, danced on the stone floor more gayly than sunlight. The "wold quaddle," muttering indignation, continued to spuddle in defiance long after it was too dark to spuddle effectively. So they had the kitchen to themselves.

"'Tis coldish to drive," said Ruth, seating herself in the chimney corner beneath the wooden salt box and the bacon flitch.

"'Tis that," replied George, sitting beside her.

"A bit o' fire do seem good ;" and she held her hand toward it.

"Do that." As he imitated her movement their hands touched, and no longer feeling the need of words, he boldly put his arm around her waist in the good old fashion of the old courting corner.

"You mustn't," she said with some irritation, but she could not move away, being already in the innermost nook. And so he did.

"Come out in orchard to-morrow. There by the little stile over-right the pit," he whispered.

"Why, there's nothing down there, is there?"

"I'll come across."

It was almost dark outside, and the solitary blackbird, just now piping of love and springtime in the crab tree by the home-field hedgerow, ceased his song. But something more solemn than evening cast a shade upon the window. The "wold quaddle," forced to give up gardening, rose and peered into the brightened room. At this unguarded moment, betwixt day and night, before the shutters hide the secrets of the hearth, one may sometimes catch glimpses of the soul of domestic life. But eyes cannot truly see what the heart has never suffered. There Mrs. Toop saw things—things such as never happened when she was young—things which, viewed by firelight through the clear retrospect of a long, spinsterly experience, appeared uncalled for and unreal. George was holding Ruth's hand. He was leaning forward to look into the girl's face, as she bent her head toward the glowing brand. Their lips were silent—only parted with the mute eloquence of the infancy of Love.

And you would scarcely believe it, that the brazen thing—the slut (that ever Mrs. Toop should use the word), was looking as simple and as sheep-

faced as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. The old lady hurried indoors, trowel in hand, but George was sitting on the other side of the hearth.

This earth has seen bold men, but none had ever the temerity to marry Mrs. Toop. Nor did tradition speak of any who had ever proposed it. Toop was a merely maiden name, upon which brevet rank had eventually been conferred; and, indeed, generous-minded people often went so far as to speak of "wold Mother Toop."

Tall, thin, and angular, she habitually wore long-waisted black, bristling with bugles, perhaps the better to sustain her rank and position, perhaps as a complimentary mourning for the Toop who had never been. She was very thin; thin both body and soul. People in that neighborhood called her "vinnied," meaning that the blood in her veins was blue, and that she lacked generosity, like a skim cheese. As she shook hands with the daughter of Gentleman Upcott she smiled with the joviality of a sore throat sucking an acid drop.

"You've come down on one like a thunderclap, for sure Mr. Granger forgot to tell me till yesterday," she said; "not but what it's a great compliment, though how he could ha' forgot it, I can't think. You'll be quite an acquisition, Miss Upcott; quite,

I'm sure. You'll be able to tell Camel volk that I shall be free to run over sometimes now there's somebody here to look to the house a bit. You could say, George Biddlecombe, to Cousin Toop that perhaps I might come over on the first fine day. It will be all holiday times now, I'm sure."

Just then Uncle Granger waddled in, and they supped on bread and cheese and cider, sitting around the fire. George's errand did not transpire, and he had evidently forgotten about the meal. The conversation turned on the wonderful promise of apple blowing—if it shouldn't all get cut off. But a proud spring often gets its comb cut, and the greatest blessing in nature is all the seasons in their turn. This truth having been examined in every aspect, and illustrated by reference to late frosts and their consequences in Uncle Granger's youth, George cantered home on his old mare.

"An' you be a pretty maid!" cried Uncle Granger, shaking a fat finger at his niece, but whether in accusation, warning, or approval she could not tell. "Come, light your cannel; we wun't turn night into day. You do know the room."

She looked from the dormer window through a glade of apple-trees, and the bars of the little stile over-

right the pit were shining in the moonlight. Should she go? She could not feel quite sure, but pictured herself teasing him by constantly appearing in the orchard, but never departing from the precincts of the house. Then she opened the box, and from the tray beneath the cover took her new, wide-brimmed Leghorn hat. It was a novelty, and a deal of moral courage had gone to the purchase of that hat. With some misgivings she placed the candle convenient to the looking-glass, and tried it on, adjusting it with a hand raised to either side of her head. It suited her to admiration, and she sighed like someone startled by a stroke of genius. Then, as she moved her head attempting new effects, the brim knocked down the candle, for it takes time to become familiarized to a novelty—a truth which, knowing the idiosyncrasy of the Marston mind, she had considered when she bought the hat.

"Bother the silly candle. Stupid thing!"

Then she laughed. It would be difficult for a man to kiss her under that projecting brim. She would not go to-morrow. Certainly not. But some day she would wear it a little forward, and put down her head by the little stile over-right the pit.

CHAPTER VI.

CAMEL FOLK.

NEWS did not travel fast in those days, but then it kept sweet so much the longer. Why, the plainest story, without the faintest suggestion of salt in it, lasted for years as fresh as butter. People brought it out on holidays, turned it inside out, patched it, and at last left it, like an old coat, to the succeeding generation. It improved by wear; and, as it got threadbare, grew valuable by tender association; for an ancestral story, even if it had no point, conferred dignity, like a piece of land received by inheritance. You could walk leisurely down to your garden hatch, when the whole parish scented of lilac, and boys had been knocking golden chains off your laburnum into the dusty road until your flower plot was covered with stones so big as hen eggs; and you could call over a box hedge to

your neighbor standing on a three-legged stool on a kitchen chair, clipping back his yew tree, that: "This throwing o' stones ought to be put down. Why, I once heard grandfather tell that when he were a chile in petticoats, young John Toop het he upon the head wi' a stone, and knocked un down all of a crump wi' his little lags under un; and Mrs. Toop, looking over that very hedge, gived herself such a turn to see the blood, that that was how 'twas wold Isaac Toop walked bow-legged to the day of his death."

Then your neighbor would respond, "Dear! dear!" and go on trimming his yew tree into a gloomy likeness to a peacock with a spread tail.

But there was nothing nauseating about news in those days. It could not be flashed upon you then; it had to travel respectably, and be delivered "by word o' mouth."

George Biddlecombe did not forget his message; but the news that Mrs. Toop was expected was bruited about Camel full a fortnight before she arrived. Relatives of Uncle Granger then pushed forward their work so as to go up "an' zee the wold soul," for it was only thoughtful to inquire about the weak huckles, and politic to be attentive to a body

who might put in a word one of these days. Besides, news was scarce, and something might have happened at Rimpton. So many people therefore dropped in to Cousin Toop's that Mrs. Toop found herself the center of quite a social circle.

"I don't tell you," she said, nodding her head to give emphasis to the narration, "but what Mr. Granger has been better, and he has been worse; but of course now wi' nimbler hands to give attention, and younger feet to run, we must expect wonders. For one night Ruth Upcott and her box came like one out o' the clouds with scarcely so much as a wink o' warning. Though for that I can't say, for perhaps wi' others it mid be different, for young George Biddlecombe was waiting, and perhaps expected, for the way that couple behaved, as I saw wi' my own eyes, chancing unbeknown to glance through window, was sickening, and their very shadows must ha' shamed the very walls, for that man squeezed an' hugged that maid as if he'd get at the very heart o' her. She has one o' these new Leghorn hats, I see, for Zundays."

"I can't zee what there is in a Leghorn hat."

"Very little sense, you mid be sure."

"Well, the Upcotts was always

undercreeping. Wi' all their pride they'd do any mortal thing, I do believe."

"An' only flesh an' blood like anybeddy else."

"An' forty thousand Leghorn hats can't alter that."

"Nor hoods lined wi white satin."

"But how'd they take George Biddlecombe?"

"She'd be doing well for herself."

"Well, there! If we be all allotted vor life, an' do keep our eyesight, we shall zee mwore."

Words expressing so much piety sounded prophetic. But Camel people do not calmly await events. Theirs is the loftier faculty which creates circumstances. On calm spring evenings they chatted over hedges of closely clipped box, or pinched sweetbriar leaves by garden gates, and shouted conversation across the road. And Simon Sly of Adber told his story to the country-side. And Ebenezer Upcott, in his egotism, proclaimed to the whole country that, having been made an April fool, he had given George Biddlecombe a thrashing, and Ruth was his witness. Putting this and that together, a capital history was compiled, characterized by greater truth and rotundity than a modern newspaper report.

Then in a fragmentary way stories came round to old Biddlecombe. He never joined the group of gossips, and few of them had the hardihood to face the stinging whip of his tongue. They had writhed under it too often, but now there seemed an opportunity of retaliation. It was noticed that George was absent of an evening, and everybody knew where he went, and wondered whether his father also knew. But the genius of Mrs. Toop first suggested that "somebody really must call on old Biddlecombe to congratulate him, to be sure." Nobody dared. At last a middle-aged, yellow-headed Toop, with blue eyes and a flat face, was urged into it by the force of public opinion. In despair, he borrowed a flour bag, and went to buy two pennyworth of bran for that purpose.

The miller was leaning over the half-door pouring the bran into the bag from a peck measure when the remark was made :

"Glad to hear George have caught a mind to Miss Upcott, miller."

Biddlecombe's bushy eyebrows scowled until they touched each other, and he cast on the patient Toop a glance so keen that it searched the depths of those transparent, hesitating eyes.

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"Fools!"

It was this power of rapid inference which startled folk; for any other man in Camel would have said, "You fool."

Toop rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand, and stood waiting for his bran like a patient ass.

It was too much for Biddlecombe. Beside himself with scorn and indignation, he threw the peck measure at the man's head.

Now, in considering this outrage it is only fair to remember that the peck measure did not injure Toop's head. There was a solidity about that head against which the peck measure became a complete wreck. When urged by public opinion to seek a remedy in law, Toop was as stubborn as a mule. He avowed repeatedly that the peck measure "never so much as brought up a bump." Still, a delicate point arose under the lilac bushes as to whether it might not be at any rate a technical assault to break your peck measure on another man's head. But nothing came of it but this: that Toop, having broken the ice, the parish no longer hesitated to take liberties with Miller Biddlecombe.

Thus he became the victim of constant annoyances; and he took

to shutting his mill of an evening early, and sitting within out of sight, or on the black hatches behind the mill out of hearing.

Then, if any knocked at the door he might knock.

"Fools!"

That was the constant cry of his loneliness—the attitude of his heart toward humanity. For the first time in his life he absented himself from the parish church, not from intelligent disagreement with doctrine—a reason rarer in those days—but because it angered him to see the able-bodied, heavy-minded herd. And in his solitude strange thoughts came into his mind—visions as clear as madness. He could fancy his last persecutor crushed beneath the heavy, moaning mill wheel. And once, peering into the pond, he saw Toop's unwieldy body entangled in the weeds.

One evening he was walking around his garden, and stopped to admire the rapid growth of a row of green peas. The mill was silent, the door shut. The miller scowled as John Sprackman drove his wagon into the yard. It was a maxim with him that good customers come betimes.

"Too late. Ha! ha! Too late," he cried almost gleefully.

"I be late," said John, raising his hat to scratch his head thoughtfully; "I be late. I can't deny it. I can't, an' I wun't vor noo man liven. But we've ha' had very bad luck."

"Ha! ha! Luck's first cousin to management. Good or bad, they do show kin. They do feature each other."

"Ah!" reflected John. "There's that beyond management. What can 'ee do if you be overlooked? Why, up to Cadbury there were two cows an' a dunkey died in one day. They thought 'twere yew leaf. Not that, Mr. Biddlecombe; not that. The cows mid, but the wold dunkey werden such a vool as to eat yew leaf. They were witched, right enough. And now there were two cows died o' milk fever last week, an' to-day meäster's bay mare gi'ed herself a sheäke, an' urnd back two steps mebbe, an' valled down wi' her lags all astrout. She'll never be noo good. Why, she've a broke off both shafts an' het herself all to vlitters. There, 'tis enough to ruin any man if do goo on. And Mr. Upcott, he do get in a fine tare, I tell 'ee."

The miller went indoors, and presently returned bringing a cup of cider, which he handed to John

without the formality of asking him to drink.

"Come from——"

Pointing his thumb over his shoulder, John mysteriously indicated the home of good cider.

Miller Biddlecombe nodded.

"Ah!"

"Well! 'Tis my rule not to work all hours. You be late, but I shan't break my rule. A rule a broke is like a vence wi' a shard. But here's the key. Goo yourself. You'll zee your zacks aneast the door."

While John staggered under the last sack, and then stood puffing and patting his head with a red handkerchief, the miller replenished the cup.

"Here's luck," said John.

"So Ebenezer Upcott do get in a tantrum?"

John shook his head slowly in superlative affirmation.

"He do zo."

"And talk loud?"

"Why, he do git that begrumpled, an' down-arg, an' ballyrag, an' holler hiszelf into zitch a tare, you'd think the clouds must vall. Why, he come to blows wi' your Garge. Ah! you do know he did."

"Eh? What's that? Come to blows wi' George. Ha! ha! That 'ud be a fine sight. Why, George could

pitch un over hedge, big as he is. He'd be nothing afore George."

"But your Garge forgi'ed un, by all accounts. Ah! Mr. Biddlecombe, 'twere the thought o' the maid, sir—the thought o' the maid. Good-night, Mr. Biddlecombe, sir. Good-night, and much obliged."

The wagon rumbled out of the yard, and the miller went slowly into his house. Taking the book from the dresser shelf, he glanced at Ebenezer's account. Since the change to Marston it had grown considerably.

"Goo on, Gentleman Upcott," he laughed to himself; "goo on. If do cost me a hunderd pound, I'll break your back and cripple 'ee so as you shall never hold up your head a sound man again. You shall be any man's servant, and starve because you can't get work for hire. Mid I live to zee 'ee break stones on the road. Mid I live to zee 'ee die in a ditch."

Then drawing Ebenezer's promissory note from his pocket, he read it carefully, and was glad, because to-morrow was the first of May.

CHAPTER VII.

CARY FAIR.

THE first of May. Bright with sunshine, sweet with cowslips, and musical with humming insect life. Everybody was going to Cary Fair. John Sprackman wore a clean smock and a bunch of lilac in his billy-cock hat. The sun gilded the yellow wagon, and peeped through a barricade of hurdles at the red backs of a load of calves —"zo tidy a lot o' calves" as John could "ever call to mind."

Gentleman Upcott, in brocaded waistcoat and a blue coat with brass buttons, hurried out of the door. A huge seal glittered from his fob ; his top-boots looked more jaunty than usual.

"I'm not proud. Oh, no. I say, I'm not proud. Now the mare's dead, I'll ride along in the wagon. I say, I'll ride along with John Sprackman. Come, John; come. Don't stay about. Come along. I say, come along."

And he mounted the shaft and adjusted his back against the hurdles.

Truly there is no pride like enforced humility. So erect his head, as they passed Camel Mill, Miller Biddlecombe half suspected him of having the money in his pocket.

A quarter of a mile from Cary he alighted.

"Not that I mind being seen in a wagon. Not I. Not a straw. I say, not one straw. But I want to stretch my legs. I say, after being penned up, I want to stretch my legs."

So he entered the fair on foot, and was soon elbowing his way among the crowd. Uncle Granger was there in his low pony trap, with Ruth in her Leghorn hat; and from a distance George watched without venturing to accost them. He had met her more than once by the little stile over-right the pit, and love made him both bold and shy. He exaggerated the public interest taken in Ebenezer's assault, and his own patience in the quarrel; and he was determined to prove his manhood and wipe out the unrequited blow that day. So he hovered about, waiting for the sports to begin. Love and a sense of shame were making his heart fierce.

"Hallo, Uncle Granger. How's Uncle Granger? I say, how's Uncle Granger? Ruth!"

Ebenezer nodded this brief recogni-

tion to his daughter, placed his hands in his breeches pocket, and puffing out his cheeks to express the warmth of walking, looked larger than ever.

"I—I came along in the wagon. I—I say, I rode on with the calves. I've had bad luck. Very bad luck. Two cows died in a fortnight, and last week my bay mare, as fine a mare as ever stepped, fell down and knocked herself to pieces. I say, cut herself to pieces. Now, that's bad luck. Very bad luck for any man."

And raising his voice, he looked around as if bad luck, when really superlatively bad, were a matter to boast of.

"Dear, dear," said Uncle Granger, and Ruth felt sad about the mare.

"But I shan't be in a hurry to buy. I say, it's a great mistake to be in a hurry. I shall wait to see what I want. In fact, I've got no business here to-day, but a score of calves half sold before I came. It's wise to look around, because you never know what you may see."

An array of traveling shows and tradesmen's stalls lined the street. Drums were beaten, trumpets blared, and Ebenezer, looking round, caught sight of a sudden rush, and then a dozen hats thrown into the air.

"They're on for singlestick. I say, they're on for singlestick," he

cried, and the crowd hurried toward a stage plentifully bestrewn with billy-cock hats.

The *élite* of Cary was ranged on a bench behind the stage at a cost of threepence each. The crowd loudly disputed concerning priority, but it was finally decided that a hat thrown by John Sprackman had fallen first upon the stage. John was elated with success.

"You zee, 'tes young Garge Biddlecombe's hat, right enough. That's whose hat 'tes, right enough. 'Tidden my hat. I do kip my hat 'pon my yead. I don't want to goo up there to have my crown cracked wi' a groun' ash stick. No, no. He wer' zo vur back I put his hat on vor un. But 'tidden my hat. 'Tis young Garge Biddlecombe's hat, sure enough. But if Zammy Tucker o' Long-Load should het young Garge athirt the buttock, 'twun't do for he to stop to rub the pleäce. But that's whose hat 'tes, right enough."

Ebenezer pushed close to the platform. As George sprang up the steps, Uncle Granger, forgetful of weak huckles, stood up in the little low trap. Ruth's face flushed, and she felt angry with George for playing. Not that it mattered to her; a few kisses were not so compromising in those days. Yet as he stood there

with the May sunlight on his brown hair, she felt keenly anxious that he might not be beaten. Everybody was prejudiced in favor of one combatant or the other, and she hated Samuel Tucker of Long-Load.

The players stood up before each other, shook hands, and said, "God save our eyesight."

For some time the play was so wary that neither obtained advantage, but presently, after some stamping of feet and clattering of sticks, George received a blow on the forehead.

"Blood! blood! No blood!" shouted the spectators, and even Uncle Granger, too far off to see, shouted "No blood," with the true party spirit which is superior to truth.

The umpire deliberately put on his spectacles and stared at the bruise. It was a bump as big as a stubbard apple. The local surgeon minutely examined it. There was certainly a redness and a moisture suggestive of blood, but a transparency about the moisture which went far to relegate it to the category of a "bead o' pink zweat." The surgeon denied the existence of any such fluid, and argument was becoming hot enough to eventuate in blood when Ebenezer stepped upon the stage.

"No blood. I maintain, no blood." He shook his head dogmatically, re-

fusing to hear expostulation, while the umpire with judicial gravity produced from his pocket a sheet of white blotting paper.

The cries ceased as the crowd breathlessly watched its application to the stubbard apple. The umpire patted the surface delicately as if he feared the skin beneath would pop, but the closest scrutiny revealed the paper as innocent as when fresh pressed.

"No blood."

"I affirmed no blood," cried Ebenezer loudly.

But as he descended from the platform someone plucked his sleeve, and looking round he saw Miller Biddlecombe. In his excitement he thought only of the dispute.

"No blood. I said, no blood. It's absurd. I had an altercation with George myself the other day, but that makes no difference. I say, that makes no difference to me, and I maintained, 'no blood.'"

"I knew you 'oodn't forget the first o' May, Mr. Upcott, zur. I zed, I shall look vor Mr. Upcott at Cary Vair. Ha! ha! I knew you'd be here to pay my little debt. But never count money in a crowd. That's my maxim, Mr. Upcott. Zo let's vind some quiet place."

"Yes. I had a word with George, but I was sorry for it. I say, I was

sorry for it." Pleased with this magnanimous admission Ebenezer did not notice the nervous quivering of the miller's lip.

"I brought on the bit o' paper in my pocket."

"Oh! I didn't forget, Miller Biddlecombe. I didn't forget. I say, I was looking about for you. Well, Neighbor Biddlecombe, we know each other after these years, I should think. Perhaps you've heard of my bad luck. I was going to ask you to let this matter stand a day or two. I'll attend to it shortly. I say, very shortly. I'll look in on you; that'll be the way. I say, that'll be the best way."

"Ha! ha! The best way is to keep your day, Mr. Upcott, zur. An' you do remember I do keep my rule. I do only know one cure for a borrowed bebt, an' that only good, done in time. Perhaps I mid zend 'ee the copy of a writ. It do gie vigor to a weak back, zo they dos zay, the copy of a writ."

"Good. Very good. Vigor to a weak back. I say, very good. Well done, Miller Biddlecombe; one of the best things I've heard for a long time."

"Then hold it fast in mind, Ebenezer Upcott. 'T'ull be well vor 'ee, I tell 'ee; I don't say I shall, but I can—remember that," and the old

man turned away with a slight gesture of contempt.

Ebenezer walked back into the fair almost losing sight of the threat in the miller's habitual irony. "Vigor to a weak back. Very good; I say, very good," he kept repeating.

He would have told the story to Uncle Granger, but did not wish to disclose the secret of the debt. Yet the copy of a writ is not a pleasing subject for conversation. Treated however lightly, it is depressing, and for a few minutes the sense of impecuniosity weighed heavily on Upcott. He did not know whence to obtain the money; and other sums were owed, and creditors becoming restless. Well, if pressed he must try to borrow elsewhere. Then he began to congratulate himself on his adroit management of the miller; and then loud shouts recalled his attention, and he hurried back to learn that young George Biddlecombe had cracked the crown "o' Zammy Tucker o' Long-Load." Under the circumstances Ebenezer rode home with a neighbor, fully justified in believing that he had enjoyed a most successful day.

"Bless my heart!" he cried, at Marston Corner. "I've clean forgot the calves. Where's John Sprackman? I say, where's John Sprackman? It's

his fault. Bless my heart alive. Well, I suppose it isn't much odds."

Now although deficient in demonstration Uncle Granger was at heart an enthusiastic sportsman. He loved a broken head on somebody else's shoulders and respected the man who broke it. Moreover, the triumph of a near neighbor over an inhabitant of a distant and therefore inferior parish pleased him greatly. He sang George's praises and glanced slyly at Ruth. Did he think there was something between her and George Biddlecombe? It was impossible to tell. But if anything should come of it—though that was absurd, for it was only fun with no harm in it—but if anything *should*, why, Uncle Granger's approval would weigh heavily with her father. So with a toss of the head she condemned cudgel playing and only wondered how people could be so foolish.

Then George came sauntering up, his hands in his pockets, his face wearing the sheepish look which so often distinguishes greatness.

Uncle Granger's countenance was far more joyous as he cried, "Well done, George. Well done." Then he leaned forward in the little low cart and enthusiastically shook the young man by the hand. "Come over this evening. Come over, I say."

"Thank you, Mr. Granger. I'll walk across. Good-by for the present."

Ruth's eyes met his. She had worn the Leghorn hat more than once at the little stile over-right the pit and she knew it was an invitation.

During the silent homeward drive she sat weighing the propriety of cowslip picking that evening in little three-acres over the orchard hedge. She liked a meeting to be quite accidental; and of course it was not absolutely certain that he would come that way.

Morn, noon, and night since Lady-day she had been thinking of George Biddlecombe. She liked him, enjoyed a sense of power in worrying him; but as for being seriously in love and marrying that was quite another matter. She reasoned with herself that she did not care about getting married at all. None of the others were married. It was the loftiest boast of the Upcotts that they kept themselves to themselves. But that was hardly an argument against matrimony, since neither of the others had had a romance—except Sempronia, who once slapped the head of a man from Bristol, in patent boots, for kissing her under the mistletoe at an evening party. But then Sempy was severe and puritanical; and even she admitted on the following morning that

she wouldn't have minded so much if it had meant anything.

"Hark to the gookoo," said Uncle Granger. "Hop out an' open the gate, there's a good maid."

Long shadows from the elm trees in the hedgerows were stretching across the meadows when George came in sight that evening. He had dressed with care. A Sunday coat denoted the serious nature of his errand; a flower of considerable dimensions gave a holiday aspect to his buttonhole; but the heart beneath was sad. A certain sinking of the heart often accompanies a determination to speak out.

Did she love him? Would she marry him? It was not possible—for everybody would be against it, his father, her father—and he was such a plain chap—and yet how he loved her! and how he would work for her! it almost seemed as if she *must* love him. Thus his hopes and fears alternated between the sunshine and the shadow.

She had picked a double handful of cowslips as big as a truckle cheese.

"I walked across," he said, "the same as I said."

"Yes."

"I had something to say." He stopped and stared at the gold dust from the goldcups on his boots.

She laughed like the peal of Camel bells on a wedding day.

"What have you done with it?" she said almost too innocently.

He drew himself up to his full height. How tall he was, how straight he was; and Lord! how solemn he looked.

"I know how it will seem, my telling you such a thing; but I can't help it. There are things the heart must speak. Perhaps they mid be put there a purpose to be spoken. If you were like some, perhaps it wouldn't matter, but I know you've been brought up wi' everything different to most, and although it's little I've got, perhaps the day'd come when I should find it had been wrong to hold silence. I should never get it out o' my heart. Never. I've loved 'ee a long time—long before the day you went to Marston. And I should never stop loving of 'ee, not even if I had to starve my heart for the want of looking on your face. And sometimes I've thought you did care—a little; and then again 'twere only gayety o' heart and playwardness after all. And now I'm bound to ask for a Yes or a No, or whether if I could do well and come wi' a chance of everything you could want, whether your heart 'ud turn from me if it were all left to that. I shouldn't ask

'ee to come to poverty nor hard work. But if money could do it, I'd get it—I'd get it if 'twere on the other side o' the earth."

He stopped, but she did not speak.

"And if 'twere a No I should go away. I couldn't bear the place after that. I couldn't look and not long—and I couldn't keep from looking. I should go right away."

"I shouldn't trouble to go away," was all she said.

Love is a fool, a blind idiot devoid of understanding, and with no more wit than a wagtail. His only virtue and salvation is that he cannot keep from looking. He took it for a No. And yet there is a sort of humor about the little rascal that you can't help liking him too, for when George looked for the last time with something like a tear in his eye there was something uncommonly like laughter in Ruth's.

"You would?"

And then—well, I will only add this, that if you desire a never failing specific do not rely too implicitly on a Leghorn hat.

Everything was changed. The future became as golden as the meadow with its goldcups and cowslips and clumps of primroses on the orchard bank. They could talk at a hand-gallop now and take all their obstacles flying.

"We'll keep it to ourselves, Ruth," said George.

"And just as well," she agreed, with a significant nod of the head.

"For everybody'll be against it at first. Your father and mine. And I've got nothing o' my own. But if I could get round father to put me in a tidy little farm: what would 'ee want, Ruth? Shall I have to wait to build a king's palace, or what?"

The wood quests were cooing in the elms, and a home screech came flying out of the apple tree.

She only laughed. "I said to Uncle Granger that I'd come for keep and clothes, but you see *he* was a relative."

"And dear at that."

They started, for the voice seemed to come out of the clouds. But there on the rail above them on the orchard bank was Uncle Granger, in a white smock, puffing a long clay pipe. He had waddled out to inspect the apple blooth and hear the birds sing.

"She is that," retorted young George, with wit as nimble as the cudgel that cracked the crown of Zammy Tucker o' Long-Load.

Uncle Granger shook his head.

"'T'll be a good cider year, please God," he said, and waddled home without another word.

Now what on earth *did* Uncle Granger think?

CHAPTER VIII.

GEORGE DEPARTS.

THE three black hatches which bay back the mill pool are nearly hidden from the highroad. There is no bridge at that place, although when the water is not running a man can easily walk across the flat, slanting stones which form the bed of the weir. A low wall, roughly built, protects the edge of the pond, and it was on this that Miller Biddlecombe used to sit and brood upon his wrongs.

He had said nothing to George about Ruth Upcott since the day that Ebenezer ridded house. It was not safe to do so (his quick perception had taught him that), and so he waited, warily watching events. He knew that George had spoken, as well as if he had heard the words. George spoke on the night of the cudgel playing. And for a fortnight the miller sat there every evening until dark talking to himself about it.

It was a golden sunset, beautiful

and calm. Midges were hanging in thousands over the surface of the still water, sometimes broken into waves by a crossing moor hen or into ripples by an occasional trout. Every leaf on the willow trees was reflected as clearly as in a mirror. So were the blood-red wallflowers growing from the chinks between the stones. From the opposite bank on the strip of mud between the water and the lush grasses a rat peered at the miller; but the miller was as still as a monument, and the rat did not move.

He had not spoken to George. With habitual secretiveness he kept his deeper thoughts to himself and brooded over them—a miser of malice hoarding threats within his soul.

But something in the quietude of that evening, the fragrance of the wallflowers or the low murmur of the gnats, seemed to lead him back to long ago, when, the wheel having ceased for the day, he sat there with the woman who loved—loved his very crookedness itself—and in defiance of friends had dared to marry him. He remembered the eagerness, the burning passion of that unexpected love, and the exultant happiness of their short married life. Then she was suddenly snatched from him. The neighbors bemoaned a motherless babe; but he shed no tears.

Their kindness brought no comfort, and his heart hardened against their futile condolences. What did they mean by their talk of his "great loss"? these people who had opposed his marriage, and blamed her living to beweep her dead. Then they called him cripple; and now they cried for him—the fools whose words were a mere mockery.

And he stood by the open grave beside the churchyard yew, when the sky was of lead, and the breath of winter was driving the last dead leaves from the tall poplar trees. The pitiless hail half drowned the hurried muttering of the parson's mummery, but he heard the crumbled earth rattle on the coffin lid—and looked—and knew the inherent injustice of all things; and creeping heavily beneath his load of crape to his deserted home, he shut the door in the faces of the bearers, for the keen intelligence gleaming through his distorted frame had seen that Life has nothing but folly and knavery. The most of men were able-bodied fools, and God had robbed him.

From that day no man by invitation had ever taken bit or sup at the mill. The miller went silently about his daily work and a neighbor brought up the scarcely noticed child by hand. But when little George

could run and used to come peeping in at the mill door, a sense of father-hood quickened in Biddlecombe's heart. His pride awakened, and with it a desire for money. He began to measure his gratitude to his dead wife by the wealth he could amass for her child. And how riches had grown, to be sure! The mill was his, the fields were his, and also the cottages across the lane. All that George might look any man in the face and hold up his head in the parish. And were these to be thrown away in folly and finery by an Upcott girl without a penny to her name? There was never an Upcott could keep things together. Folly and vanity ran in the blood. Why, Ebenezer, who began with so much money in hand, had come rolling down the hill like mad, and one turn more would bring him to the bottom. As he thought of this man's futility, an unutterable wrath, an instinctive hatred surged within his heart. It would delight him to complete the ruin of Ebenezer Upcott.

Then George came sauntering round a bend of the brook, a fishing rod in his hand. He stopped on the opposite bank and dapped with a window-fly beneath the willow tree. The trout came at once. There was a splash, and the rat dived. The old

man uttered no note of triumph, no wonted laugh of exultation over the victim, but glared angrily at George. George was a fool like all the rest. That such active manhood should suffer a blow argued a crippled spirit, and for once he felt ashamed of his son.

"Ha! Zo you let Gentleman Upcott dust your jacket. He warmed your back, by all accounts. A pretty thing for a man o' your age. But I suppose you got the spirit o' a mouse, or the heart o' a maid. Fit to catch a little flickeren vish that can't do 'ee noo harm 'ithout his bone should stick in your droat an' choke 'ee."

"You don't think I were afeard, do 'ee?" scornfully retorted George.

"Think you wer' aveard? I think you were a vool. Why, where's your pride? To run a'ter a girl who 'ouldn't look at 'ee if she had zo much as zixpence. As God's in heaven, if I thought she'd have thee, she should have thee poor enough. Why, she'd scorn to be zeen in the same ten-acre vield wi' 'ee. Money'll slip away where she do manage, an' then she'll look round to wonder where 'tis gone. Why, half the gaping volk in Camel, wi' their mouths open to swallow each other's lies, be tellen what a vool thou bist."

"An' let 'em tell."

"Let 'em tell? Ha! ha! Let

'em tell. They shall tell that 'twasn't to my mind. Let 'em tell that I cut 'ee off wi' a shilling. Let 'em tell that I turned 'ee out o' doors, an' then let 'em tell how she 'ouldn't look at 'ee. Why, she'd think it a compliment to take 'ee wi' plenty, an' scorn 'ee wi' nothen to your name."

"An' if she did, 'twouldn't so much matter that I'd ha' got none."

The old man rose, glared angrily upon his son, and raised his stick with a movement of impatient menace. To him George was still a boy. No boundary divides the dependency of youth from the free state of manhood, and such words seemed almost childish. For a moment he was speechless with wrath. Then his fury burst out like a torrent.

"'Twouldn't matter, did 'ee zay? 'Twouldn't matter that I've worked an' strove early an' late, that you mid vind life easy, an' look any man in the face. Can I carry the gold or the ground wi' me when I do goo, that I should zet my heart on it day an' night? Did I ever look at things askew to think that I, a cripple, could find joy in that I couldn't use? I wer' a vool vor all my pains, not to know that there'd be no thanks, an' that zome perty piece o' vanity 'ud turn your head, an' lead 'ee into waste, until the

pinch o' want did make 'ee wish that I wer' dead. 'Twouldn't matter? It 'ud matter this much, that not a penny piece shall you have to buy your own ruin. I'll leave it zo by will, that you shall never handle your own, an' lose every varden if you do marry the hussy. Her father's a beggar. I won't be kin to a beggar."

"How's he a beggar? He paid what he owed *you*. He never came a-beggen here that I heard o'."

"An' if he came starven I'd shut my door upon un. A fool wi' a proud temper. I shall live to zee un in ruin. He's under water now. I tell 'ee, he's under water, a zinken man, an' if he were there avore my eyes I'd see un zink, an' tell un he het my vlesh an' blood. You can choose. You can choose to once. A stroke o' the pen can let it all go so easy as a crowbar can raise a hatch. You can have her wi' nothen if she'll have you. Ha! ha! Go an' zee. Go an' zee."

The miller turned away and walked toward the house, leaving George moodily looking over the hatches. Should he tell his father that she had promised? Or should he wait for a more favorable opportunity? It seemed a meanness to hide this mighty truth that she loved him—a sort of cowardice to hesitate to proclaim it. And yet there happened sometimes

a moment when his father was quite kind.

Presently the miller looked out from the front door.

"George!" he cried, "there, don't bide moonen about. Come in an' have your supper."

The tone was conciliatory and George obeyed. The miller had drawn the cider and put out the bread and cheese. They sat down together by the hearthstone, and, anxious to efface his recent anger, the old man became quite garrulous.

"Ha! ha! Old Tommy White isn't long for this world. I zaw doctor rottle past twice in one day. He do want to make the most o' un while he do live, zimmy-zoo. An' passon bin up too. He bid there full a hour—a hour an' ten minutes by Camel clock. An' they've ha' zend un up little milk pudden's vor vull a week. I watched 'em by. Zo I do lot he won't be long vor life. An' then the little close o' grass, an' the bit o' plow-ground 'ill be vor zale. They must zell, vor zo 'twer' left. An' we'll buy it, cost what mid, an' that'll make it up to dree-an'-zixty acres, all to lie together close an' quite wi' not a vootpath upon it. Why, you mid milk a score, ay, two or dree-an'-twenty cows upon it if you be zo minded... I've done well vor 'ee,

George. That's better than beginnen wi' plenty to end wi' none."

He stopped to laugh with a sort of feverish exultation, but the allusion kept George silent.

"What! Be dumb, then?"

Receiving no reply, the miller lit a candle and groped his way upstairs. George could hear him moving in the bedroom overhead. Presently he returned and pitched a small leathern bag of money upon the oak table by which George was sitting.

"Count it," he cried. "I tell 'ee, count it. Count it."

The young man hesitated; then obeyed an impatient gesture. Old Biddlecombe watched eagerly, as if expecting to detect deficiency in the amount. "Forty-seven pound three and four."

"Ha! ha! Count it again. I tell 'ee, count it again." And his laugh sounded hard like the clinking of the counted coins.

"That's what 'tis."

"'Tis yours. I won't keep it vrom 'ee. It come to your mother by will by her mother's side. Fifty pound, and the oddses be the duty; and I never touched it to this day. Goo an' make your way wi' it, if you be zo love-struck wi' a trumpery maid not wo'th her zalt——"

George pushed the money from him.

"I thought you'd be wiser when it comed to the pinch. But 'tis yours when you do want it, mind 'ee. 'Tis yours vor the asken. Come when you will, there 'tis wi'out a question. But not a penny of mine, mind, if you should ever take a vain, stuck-up, empty-headed fool. What, George! Then, where be gwaine?"

His hand already on the latch, without answering, George opened the door and went out. The old man carefully buttoned the money-bag in his pocket, took his stick, and hobbled into the yard.

"George! George!"

But George's figure was already dim in the twilight.

Stars were peering through the pale sky, and the sounds of day were almost hushed. Bats fluttered hither and thither, and once an owl swept over the mill with its lonely cry. The barking of a house dog, the shutting of a door, then a party of villagers talking, laughing, one of them playing a jig on the concertina, passed down the road, leaving the place to solitude and night. "A pack o' gigglen vools," cried the miller, as he went indoors.

But now he was absolutely alone. It was almost bedtime. He knew that George would not return, yet he lit a candle and sat down to wait,

muttering complaints against his son in which the words "pig-headed," "nog-headed," "zour-headed," constantly recurred. He was hurt, and grumbled against ingratitude; wounded, and tried to heal his sore with accusation and self-excuse. Then his heart hardened, and he laughed bitterly to himself in his mocking way. "Ha! ha! He'll zoon vind what 'tis to work vor his liven. To keep hours to another man's clock, and turn water into another man's stream. Work an' hardship 'ull zoon tame a proud spirit. Let un zee a vriend's back where he used to stare at his waistcoat. Let un zee where his Upcott maid'll pull up a trotten hoss to speak to un, when he's a traipsen in the mud. He'll zoon be back. Ha! ha! He'll zoon be back wi' a empty belly an' a headvull o' wisdom. He'll come now avore this year's gookoo do get hoarse wi' callen in time to save his own hay, maybe."

A sudden thought cut short the miller's soliloquy.

"'Tis a good thing he's gone. I be glad he's gone. He'd only ha' been in the way."

And he drew out the promissory note and gloated over the ruin of Ebenezer Upcott. That was the beauty of it: you could proceed at once upon a promissory note.

CHAPTER IX.

UNEXPECTED VISITS.

"THERE now. I say, there now. There's a pretty fellow. Can't hold a sheep better than that. And these are let out before they're half washed—I say, before they're a half or quarter washed."

Mr. Upcott was standing on the brink of a circular sheep wash built in the brook, superintending the washing of a few wethers. An obstreperous animal had knocked down the young chap helping the shepherd. The sheep bleated, the men laughed, the youth wrung out his hair and rubbed his eyes, but Ebenezer was not pleased. A great mind is a great misfortune, and Ebenezer, towering above trivialities, became superior to mirth.

"There's nothing to laugh at. I say, nothing whatever. It's enough to make a man ill to watch the stupidity of others. I'm not surprised at the state o' the country when I see the—the inefficiency of

people around me. No wonder the country's poor and the rates high. I say, no wonder when——"

"Ebenezer! Ebenezer!"

A couple of fields away Mrs. Upcott was calling and waving her handkerchief. When he looked round she beckoned with her hand.

"I can't come," shouted Ebenezer.

But Mrs. Upcott persisted in hurrying up to the sheep wash.

"You're wanted, Ebenezer. You're wanted in the little parlor."

The mention of that rarely used apartment ought to have moved Ebenezer, but did not.

"Well, now, Eliza. I must say this is annoying. I say, *most* annoying. So you won't take no for an answer. What is it? I demand, what is it? Can't you see how busy I am? And see how hot you've made yourself. Very foolish, indeed. I say, very unwise."

Glowing with curiosity and pleasing excitement, Mrs. Upcott panted out an explanation.

"There's a gentleman, Ebenezer. A stranger, Ebenezer. He must see you about something very particular. He—he said he'd wait. I—I showed him in the parlor. And—and I don't know why, Ebenezer, but when he wouldn't give his name, I thought of the Upcotts of Exeter."

"Well. Then I suppose I must come. Now don't you catch cold. I say, don't you go catching a chill, Eliza. Remember, I warn you against catching a chill." And affecting great annoyance, Ebenezer walked home with the slow gait of a man who is too important to be inquisitive.

The stranger, a tall man of somewhat distinguished appearance, was patiently waiting. He wore a long frock coat, threadbare and creased. One button was missing, another strained the time-honored garment tightly around his waist. Both coat and wearer having seen better days, and perhaps worse, were brushed into an appearance of resuscitated respectability. Ebenezer stared doubtfully, as if groping in his memory, while the stranger bowed and stroked his mustache.

"John Bagley! I say, John Bagley."

"I *am* Mr. Bagley."

"I thought so. I never forget a face. I say, I never forget a face."

The greeting was constrained on both sides. Recognition recalled Bagley as a confirmed borrower. The frock coat probably secreted a brief in the breast pocket, one of those half-fraudulent appeals to wholly undeserved charity which are so hard to resist.

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"I'm very sorry for my errand to you to-day, Mr. Upcott"—and Mr. Bagley's tone seemed to express acute suffering—"because you remember me in better days. But a man cannot starve, and none of us knows what he may come to. Misfortune breaks the strongest man, and I hope you'll not be offended——"

Ebenezer's suspicion was aroused as Bagley's hand softly glided into the gap left by the missing button.

"It's no good. I tell you, it's no good. I can't and won't do it, John Bagley. I've got eight daughters to provide for and I can't. Charity begins at home, and I say my first duty is at home. You should do something. Surely there's something you could do to get yourself a living. I'm afraid you're proud, but you must bend to circumstances. It's no good to show it to me. I say, it's no good——"

Ebenezer raised his hands in refusal, and turned abruptly from the inevitable petition.

"I fear there's a slight misunderstanding," said Bagley with *hauteur*. "I've been intrusted with a commission. It's an unpleasant duty, this law work; but, as you say, we must bend to circumstances. I'm sorry, but I must serve you with the

copy of a writ at the suit of John Biddlecombe."

"Copy of a writ! Copy of a—— This is sharp work. I say, this is sharp practice."

"We bend to circumstances. We no doubt obey the instructions of our client," said Bagley, speaking grandly on behalf of a great profession.

Ebenezer paced the room, glaring at the objectionable document in his hand. It seemed like a grim joke that he, Ebenezer Upcott, should be treated in this incomprehensible manner.

"And does he expect to get the money?" he cried excitedly. "I ask, did he anticipate your receiving the money?"

"Perhaps not," said Bagley grimly.

"Because if he did, he's greatly mistaken. I'll—I'll cause all the delay I can. I'll fight it! I say, I'll contest it, just to show the double-cunning rascal up. I'll put in an appearance, and then I'll leave the country. The country's almost bankrupt as it is, and this is the sort of thing to drive good men out of it. I say, I'll leave the country. I'll leave the country!"

At this point Mr. Bagley, deeming it prudent to leave the house, was followed to the door by Ebenezer, reiterating vengeance and emigration.

Safely in the garden, the process-server turned round and shouted defiance:

"I'll bear in mind what you say, Mr. Upcott. I'll give your message. Perhaps you'll bend to circumstances before it is all over."

In the porch stood a little sandy-faced boy in a smock.

"And what do you want? I say, what's your business?"

"A letter vrom Missus Toop, zur," piped the urchin.

"Eliza! Eliza! Here's something for you. Some woman's foolery or other, I suppose. What's it about? Some nonsense, I'll go bail."

But, without waiting for a reply, he walked off toward the stable.

To the five ordinary senses possessed by Mrs. Toop in no ordinary degree, as compensation for spinsterhood a sixth had been added—a sense of duty. Unlike seeing, hearing, and such-like material perceptions, it grew alert with years, brought no pleasures, but only grave responsibility prompting disinterested conduct. It perceived moral weaknesses, and those consequences to which the world in general is as blind as a bat. It marked incongruities, and by seeking to remove them proved that

the spring of lofty action is a fine discernment. It inspired the following friendly letter to Mrs. Upcott :

"DEAR MADAM :

"It may seem out of place writing to acquaint you of certain things but no pleasure to me as anybody must see at first sight and know you ought to so as not to be put out afterward when too late to lay the blame at others door. But for earsay that Mr. Upcott denied Miss Ruth to speak to young George Biddlecombe silent would I be but from a parent's word no child should go though for the past fortnight or more every evening meet they have little thinking of an eye upon them and their every action marked of which I say nothing knowing well the partiality of a mother and natural too for which one would have thought a daughter would have made return if only from a sense of duty and Mr. Granger poor dear soul with weak huckles lost in thought quite unequal to the management of a young girl wanting looking after as they will and he little dreaming of nothing innocent as the babe unborn so that with no check upon her here for interfering never could I be and she not easy to speak to that I must say if I never write another word it would be wiser

to have her home under a mother's guidance for meet they will at Mr. Granger's and stay out after dark.

"I remain

"Yours with duty

"TRYPHENA TOOP."

"Massy on me!" ejaculated Mrs. Upcott, with a sigh of relief. "The wold quaddle. Why, young volk must catch a mind to each other, I suppwose. And Ebenezer might ha' opened the letter."

But self-congratulation proved premature. At that moment Ebenezer, on horseback, pulled up at the door.

"What was it from Uncle Granger's, Eliza?" he shouted.

"Nothing, Ebenezer."

"Nothing? What answer's that? I say, 'Nothing' is a fool's answer. It must have been something."

"Only from Mrs. Toop, Ebenezer."

"But, fool as she is—I say, old fool as she is—she didn't write about nothing. What is it? There's some secret going on. You can't deceive me. I say, you never deceived me yet, and I demand, What is it?"

Recent annoyance made him more exacting than usual.

"There, I don't take any notice o't, Ebenezer," said Mrs. Upcott soothingly, as she handed him the letter.

Ebenezer read and became almost

apoplectic. At the name of Biddlecombe he tore the letter in pieces, and threw them fluttering to the wind. Indignation against the miller, impatience with difficulties, and vanity goaded by failure, burst forth in abuse of poor Ruth.

"I'm not surprised I don't get on. It's the fault of my own family. How can a man expect to be respected when he's not honored by his own household? Didn't I tell Ruth never to speak to that fellow again. I'll disown any daughter of mine who disobeys my injunctions. I'll be master of my own, and have the respect of those around me. And it's my opinion you support her in insubordination, Eliza. Now don't reply. I'll have no replying when I make up my mind. I'll go and speak to her at once."

Kicking his horse, he splashed through the brook, stumbled, shouted "Hold up!" and cantered away to Woodhouse.

Dinner was just ready as he passed the pine trees.

"There's your vather, maid. Put another plate and cup," said Uncle Granger, and a gleam of welcome and hospitality brightened his face. The homeliness of the place heightened by contrast the tempestuous entrance of Ebenezer.

"I'm not pleased! I say, I'm not pleased!" he cried, even ignoring Uncle Granger's extended hand. "I've been disregarded, and that I will not allow. After the father I've been, I deserve a very different return. I say, a very different return, after the way I've slaved to bring up my family. Didn't I tell you never to speak to that fellow again?"

"There, there! Do 'ee zit down!" said Uncle Granger.

"If you ever so much as look at the scamp again, I'll disown you. I won't have such rascally connections! A little hump-backed miller, who couldn't have got rich if he hadn't gone thieving——"

"There, there! There's no harm a-done."

"But I affirm there is harm done; and I'm very much obliged to Mrs. Toop for letting us know——"

"But not to cause trouble, I'm sure," interposed Mrs. Toop.

"There, there! Enough zed! enough zed!"

Uncle Granger's constant interruptions still more incensed Ebenezer. Turning on that respected relative, he retorted warmly:

"And I say enough is not said. And I'm surprised a man of your years hasn't learnt sense to support authority. I wish you had a pack o'

daughters of your own to worry your life out. I—I—I'm angry! I'm excessively angry! I say, justifiably angry!"

And Ebenezer went out, slamming the door behind him as a mark of his displeasure.

"There, there! Let's ha' a teddy. Your vather's a bit crisp, maid," said placid Uncle Granger, helping himself with his fork.

"And what difference was it to you, Mrs. Toop?" cried Ruth. "Who set you over me, I should like to know? I'm sure I'm not going to be watched by a prying, peeping old maid that nobody would ever have."

"To be given such words!" replied Mrs. Toop, rising from table, and speaking with determination bordering on a threat. "Stay I will not."

Now Uncle Granger loved peace or a fair stand-up fight; but domestic quarreling was his abhorrence, and above everything he hated undercreeping. "Let's have all you got to zay," was a precept which sometimes varied his habitual silence.

"Well, an' you'd better goo," he said quietly.

He was beginning to discover that, however handy a thing a woman may be in a house, two women can neither promote peace nor fight fair.

"And that, indeed," rejoined the

defiant Mrs. Toop, "will I gladly do."

"I don't like zuch back-handed ways."

"Nor yet I. That do I not."

"Zo you'd better make arrangements to once."

"And many's the door's open to me, that I do know. So I can go this very day."

"An' I'll zee you ben't hurt by it."

"Then gladly will I go this minute," exulted the intrepid woman, "and pack my things this very day."

A glimmer of humorous satisfaction overspread Uncle Granger's countenance, and he winked triumphantly at Ruth. But that evening Mrs. Toop was in her accustomed place, and days passed with no evidence of the advance of the packing.

On the fourth morning the sun was shining brightly, the scent of flowers wafted through the open window, and the air rang with the charm of singing birds.

Uncle Granger rose from breakfast, waddled to the window, and gazed into the clear summer sky.

"I be real glad to zee zuch a vine mornen vor Mrs. Toop to goo, Ruth," he said.

Perhaps he hoped Mrs. Toop would take the hint. But she sat rigidly silent, from a sense of duty.

CHAPTER X.

UNCLE GRANGER'S PARTY.

IT was known all over Camel that George and his father had had words and parted, and that George was going round a-sheep-shearing. It was also known, for Mrs. Toop told, that Ebenezer had come down on Ruth at Uncle Granger's like a thunder-clap. So everybody wondered and waited to hear the upshot of the matter.

"There. Don't 'ee let's have noo disturbance. 'Tidden wo'th while," said Uncle Granger, and for some time Ruth did not meet her lover. True, no opportunity occurred, for he was now busy enough; but Uncle Granger approvingly said, "There, there. That's a good maid."

It was formerly the custom for a party of young farmers to go from homestead to homestead shearing the flocks of the neighborhood, and

great revelry accompanied the wool harvest. An evening party followed the day's work. Great preparations therefore were necessary, and when word was received that the shearers were coming all was bustle and excitement. Uncle Granger waddled round putting everything "han' pat." Mrs. Toop and Ruth, united on the question of provisions, partially agreed about George Biddlecombe.

"For why anyone should think harm o' George Biddlecombe, that can I not see," the veteran spinster admitted.

"There, there. Your vather's word don't hold vor sheep-shearen. 'Tidden expected."

Thus Uncle Granger stretched Ebenezer's law to conformity with circumstances, like a commentator adapting a text to human institutions.

Now a certain grandeur characterized Uncle Granger's hospitality. All the relatives accepted his invitation. This was obligatory; because as Uncle Granger was not much for going out, it became a duty when occasion offered to entertain him at his own house. People came miles to show this mark of respect, and toward evening gigs and carts of all description filled the barton. A medley of nephews, nieces, and

cousins, many of them dressed in black, arrived and solemnly entered the house. It was almost as impressive as a funeral. Shyness and decorum kept the guests silent at first, and they loafed uneasily in corners until asked to "find a seat." Then in ungainly attitudes and phrase they discussed the "apple blowen."

The kettle hissed. Stacks of hot toast were placed on the table. The guests, exhausted with apple blowen, wondered at the delay.

"Why, where's Mr. Upcott, then? Why, where's Ebenezer?"

This question, buzzing about in every imaginable tone, superseded the apple crop. One sheep-shearer thought it a shame to keep good victuals waiting. Not that he was hungry himself. For that matter *he* could wait. Another with a touch of irony expected Ebenezer had been *detained* at the last moment, though, of course, perhaps it was the fashion with some to come late. Uncle Granger waddled about uneasily and kept peeping from the window.

"Dear, dear, dear. Your vather must ha' took offense," he whispered to Ruth.

So they began tea without Ebenezer. With eating and drink-

ing merriment increased, the company became boisterous, and his absence was forgotten in the more serious question:

"Did young John Patch bring his viddle?"

John blushed and hadn't felt sure it would be wanted. Not wanted? John hadn't felt sure he could play well enough. Public opinion censured "zuch foolishness," until the fiddle being found in a baize bag under the seat of John's cart the beauty of modesty became universally recognized. So they went out in home-ground by the pine trees, and even Uncle Granger triumphed over his huckles so far as to dance "hunt the squirrel" with Mrs. Toop. The relations applauded. But the cousin who sometimes sent tracts became sad.

"Ah," she lamented, "it may amuse for the moment, but Uncle George'll have to suffer for all this."

Who shall depict the simple happiness of that evening? How after supper they turned out the kitchen and varied dancing with song, and young John Patch, now irrepressible, making unearthly noises while John King was singing in his heavenly tenor, afterward explained that he was only tuning. How Uncle Granger declared that

every one there should do something, and the maid who couldn't sing should make a speech. How they called on Uncle Granger, and he only knew one song. How they waited quiet as mice, while he put down his pipe, put down his gin and water, put down the empty glass. How seriously he gave out the title, so touchingly appropriate, "The Lost Sheep on the Mountain," cleared his throat and sang:

"Bah!"

And how they laughed with surprise, just as if they had never heard it before.

To make a long story short, the speeches were dry; the dust from dancing made the men thirsty, and Ruth went to the cider cellar. George followed, as he said, to hold the light, but put down the candle because the barrel being full was slow to run. It is unwise to peg a cider cask. People who are not particular blow up the tap, but patience is the proper remedy.

"I am going away to-morrow, Ruth," he whispered.

"Away!"

"Yes. I've agreed to go up country to manage a mill. Slip out by and by to say good-by. Just a minute to say good-by."

There was scarcely time to answer.

Someone shut the door "that they might not be disturbed like," and the party gathered outside to laugh. One practical joker assured them that he only was looking through the keyhole. Another that nobody should open the door. At last elderly people who were thirsty discountenanced such nonsense, and the imprisonment ceased. Then, as it was getting late, the oldest relative proposed Uncle Granger's health, with a touching allusion to suppressed gout, inadvertently coupling it with the name of Mrs. Toop; and when Uncle Granger replied, explaining that Mrs. Toop had given notice to leave, that ancient lady, between her tears, said it was "no such thing"; she had "never so much as thought of leaving," whereat everyone cheered. Thus encouraged, she promised to tend him in life and death, in sickness or in health; it should make no difference to her; and then the party broke up. Gigs and carts went jogging homeward by all the highroads and lanes in the neighborhood; the kitchen was put straight, and Uncle Granger's household retired to rest.

But Ruth was not tired. The moon was shining through the dormer, making the room quite light, and she looked down upon the

orchard covered with blossoms white as snow.

So her father had not come that evening. With mingled shame and sadness she pictured it all—his false dignity, and her mother's pathetic regrets at alienation from her only uncle. An irresistible spirit of opposition seemed to make her blood tingle in her veins, and she felt as if in justice she owed him no obedience whatsoever. And George was going away to-morrow. Perhaps she should not see him again for months. It was sad beyond measure to have no opportunity to say good-by. She wanted to encourage him with promises; to assure and be assured of fidelity. Perhaps he would think her unkind or cold, fancying that she might have managed to meet him. She had never known the romance and longing of love until now that he was gone.

"Ruth."

It was only a whisper, but it startled her. Then she caught sight of him among the dark trunks of the apple trees beneath her window.

"Come down, Ruth."

"I couldn't."

"Just for a minute. Just to say good-by."

"I dare not."

"Only for a minute. Nobody will know."

The spell of the quiet night was upon her. The scent of the silver blossoms seemed to invite as sweetly as this whispered conference. Nobody would know! What did she care if all the world should know? It was nothing to her now she had promised to marry George. Proud to fierceness in determination and love she snatched a shawl from the foot of the bed, and, throwing it over her head, crept downstairs. The heavy oak door creaked on its rusty hinges, and she left it partly open, only for a moment just to say "Good-by."

He threw his arms around her.

"Come along," he whispered.

She felt almost afraid, yet her heart boldly acquitted her of wrong. The moonlight glinting between leaves and blossoms mottled the white dress worn at Uncle Granger's party as, yielding to his entreaty, she walked beneath the branches to the little stile over-right the pit.

"I couldn't help coming down," she said, and hid her face upon his shoulder.

"I came to say good-by to the house whether or no," he replied.

"When will you come back? Oh, when shall I see you again?"

"I'll come avore the summer's gone, if it's only for a day. Shall I write, Ruth?"

"It'll only make trouble. Father's so angry, and Mother Toop would tell."

"I'll come, and come straight to the house. I shall think o' nothing but you, and how to win you, Ruth. You won't change wi' absence?"

"Never. I'll never change."

"Not if I couldn't come?"

"But you must. You will."

"I'll come if I walk barefoot."

"Hark! What is that?"

They listened. In the distance was a rumbling of wheels. Then it ceased.

"It must have been some wagon going along the road," said George.

"I think I must go in."

"No; not yet. They're all asleep. There's no need o't unless you want to, Ruth."

"No, no. It must be after one. I'll stay till the first glimmer of morning gray. But Uncle Granger's up at daylight to draw the mower's cider. If they should find me out——"

"But I love you so much, Ruth, my darling. Kiss me. I'll love you forever. I'll get on so that your father'll be proud o' me. If he's ever hard about it, you won't change. You won't change, Ruth?"

"I will love the more. Come! I must go."

A linnet flew from the thorn bush as they passed, and sparrows were beginning to twitter beneath the eaves of Uncle Granger's house.

"Good-by, good-by."

But George held her. "Ruth," he said, "there's somebody about. Look! the tracks o' the wheels are fresh, for there's no dew on them. Somebody has driven out o' barton. Your Uncle Granger must be up and gone."

The door was wide open, and from the kitchen came the sound of a voice bewailing bitterly.

"We shall never look volk in the face again. We shall never hold up our heads no more a'ter such a blow, an' wi' eight maidens to carry the shame o't to their graves. Poor Ebenezer. An' he zo proud an' particular. 'T'ull break our hearts. 'T'ull break our hearts. Poor man!"

"Mother!" Trembling with fear and affection Ruth ran into the house. "Mother, I am here."

"To be taken quite zuddenly wi'out a thought. Poor Ebenezer! Always the best o' men, wi' the temper o' a angel. Why, 'twur only yesterday I carr'ed out the ketchup bottle in mistake vor the cow's drench, an' he scarcely zo much as zed a' angry word. Oh, my poor, dear man. After these years."

"What is it, mother? Is—is father——"

"How dare you speak his name!" cried Mrs. Upcott with that sob-broken anger which is so pitiable. "You never knew your duty to him. You never respected him, but zet yourself up against him. Poor Ebenezer, to be taken looking at the lambs in mead, and I out, and nobody to know it vor hours."

"Oh, father! poor father!" The girl put her arm around her mother's neck, but Mrs. Upcott rejected the proffered sympathy.

Uncle Granger looked stern. Mrs. Toop, whose hurried toilet extended neither to cap nor collar, bridled up until her lean neck looked quite swan-like.

"Your vather's to jail," said Uncle Granger sharply. In distress such details assume exaggerated importance.

"To Ilchester jail," moaned Mrs. Upcott.

"In jail? Why? He has done nothing. What has he done?"

"Tut, tut. Miller Biddlecombe put him for debt."

"Biddlecombe? Miller Biddlecombe put *my* father for debt? Miller——"

The enormity of such a proceeding choked her utterance, and George, who had waited in wonder because

the door was open, and anticipating a few words, entered the doorway.

Mrs. Upcott saw him and angrily thrust Ruth aside.

"It's all falseness," she cried; "I never thought to be ashamed as I have been this night. You've broke my heart. You'd better to hold wi' your Biddlecombes, an' plot, an' make mischief, an' ruin your vather. You thought nothing of him. You didn't mind his word. You didn't love your home. You've brought disgrace and shame, and gone against him. You've—you've—— I shall never take pride in 'ee again. You'll never be Ruth to me any mwore. An' zomebody must carr' poor Ebenezer his breakfast, an' there's nothing in house but the end o' the little loin o' pork that he zed were burnt in the baking."

"But it can't be for much, nor long owing," said George. "That I do know."

Uncle Granger turned round and glanced on him as an intruder.

"Ruth and I have agreed," said George, in excuse, and knowing the cause of his father's action, an idea of reparation filled his mind. "If the old man ha' done wrong I'd be the first to undo it. Ruth an' I have a-promised each other. I've got

more thoughts o' the Upcotts than o' anybody else."

"Everybody was against him. Plotting behind his back in the dead o' night, and he in jail. Caring more for his enemies than for her own father," moaned Mrs. Upcott.

"It shall be all over," cried Ruth, in a passion of self-renunciation. "It was good-by; good-by, indeed! You must think no more of me, George. It cannot be now; never, never. I will never marry."

"And very wise too, to judge by troubles brought, I'm sure," interposed Mrs. Toop.

Then Uncle Granger, pointing at the door, bore down on George, ponderously, like a wooden line of battle ship, leaving no alternative but to go.

The sun had risen and dew drops glistened everywhere. George looked at his watch. It was four o'clock. Before he could get to Camel his father would be up and at work. There was no time to lose, and he took a bee-line across the fields.

Miller Biddlecombe, kneeling on his hearth to light the fire, glanced up as a passing shadow darkened the window. The old man muttered to himself and laughed with grim mirth as he caught sight of his son. "Ha! ha! Zo he couldn't hold out long. Home's a little place till you've

lost it." Then, raising his voice: "There, you needn't to knock about your own door. He'll wear out wi' wind an' weather zoon enough. Come in, George. You be just in time. What, have 'ee growed proud, or be zuch a stranger that you mus' come home in company clothes?"

"'Twas Mr. Granger's sheep-shearing last night."

The old man ceased to laugh, and to hide his suspicion became intent upon the fire. "Do take a pack o' voolery to get a vew pack o' wool off a vew sheeps' backs. Wer' Gentleman Upcott there?"

"No; he couldn't come."

George spoke carelessly, and the old man was reassured.

"Belike you've a-brought word o' your marriage, then."

"No; nor likely to."

"Ha! ha! I told 'ee zo. I thought she'd be too big a vool vor that. She'd zooner zee a vine coat than a vull pocket. A vew brass buttons wi' nothen under that could bulge. All vor outzide show. But show's a vain flattery when 'tis the gloze o' nothen."

"I came to ask the bit o' money you talked about. I think o' going up the country. It'll be handy now."

The miller rose, hesitating between doubt and disappointment.

"Did she zay no?" he asked eagerly.

"She said nevér."

"Ha! a proud slut. Do she think she's better than what you be? I told 'ee how 't'ud be. A vain fool. She'll live to learn many a lesson yet. But George, what do 'ee want to goo vor? Bide at whome. What is ther' atween us now, bwoy. Bide at whome."

"We talked o' that some time ago. 'Tis your fault," cried George bitterly.

Miller Biddlecombe fetched the money without another word.

"Take it. 'Tis just as 'twas. You'd better to count it, vor 'tis all you'll have," he said, throwing the bag upon the table.

And George, putting the money in his pocket, went away at once.

CHAPTER XI.

ILCHESTER JAIL.

JOHN SPRACKMAN had driven Mrs. Upcott to Woodhouse in the little wagon with Cadbury on the board. Having followed the Upcott fortunes, or rather misfortunes, through so many parishes, and witnessed the fatality which even the "little dunkey" could not resist, he felt sad, and drank a cup of Uncle Granger's cider without criticism or enjoyment, only as a matter of form. John was wondering what ought to be done. He possessed peculiar wisdom; no one knew that better than himself. Many times during their drive had he called Mrs. Upcott to witness.

"You zee, I zed if we waited till they was all whome, we shouldn't meet none o' 'em on the road."

They spread "a han'vull of woat straw" on the wagon floor, and borrowed a couple of Uncle Gran-

ger's chairs. John rode on the shaft. Mrs. Upcott was silent. The torrent of her lamentation had run low, but tears coursed down her cheeks. Ruth was wretched. Even Uncle Granger with his quiet respectability had turned away, saying he could never have thought it of her.

"I'll carry father's breakfast," she said.

"I suppose you must," sighed Mrs. Upcott, but it sounded like a concession. She had never been opposed to George Biddlecombe, for money is a good thing, and with eight daughters it is well to marry one to encourage the others. But no passionate experienecs had taught her the compulsion of love. Ebenezer began tentatively by walking home with her on Sundays after church. It was considered a good match. They became engaged and announced their betrothal to the parish by sitting side by side in the same pew. Thus courtships were managed when she was young, and anything different was inexplicable.

"I had to goo to Limmenton wi' dree empty hogsheads. They got to goo right enough. Don't make a bit o' difference about they, that's a fac'. But Miss Ruth could ride on if she wer' zo minded, an' vit in very perty like, right enough," said John,

proud of an intellect which could arrange.

Mrs. Upcott was too sad to answer, and this was the only conversation on that melancholy journey. As they reached Marston, people were stirring, and they met a milking party in a cart. Curiosity was aroused. But what matter? The story must be all over the parish in no time.

As John "hitched out" his horse that morning he made up his mind. Horseshoes, a bullock's heart stuffed with pins, and other well known remedies against evil luck he had tried in vain. But a co-relation exists between complaint and cure. Even in farriery there are certain things for certain diseases, and the domestic pharmacopœia being exhausted, it is time to call in the farrier. John determined to take advice; so with a wagon-line in one hand for a blind, and a pair o' hames in the other, "to draw anybedy off the scent like," he crossed the home-ground, and, under cover of the hedgerows, struck into the lane.

On a strip of land, evidently snatched from the wayside, stood a low, thatched cottage, almost hidden in foliage and approached by a path through the narrow garden. A moss-covered apple tree leaned over

the lane. A couple of beehives stood beneath it. John hesitated, glanced round, and made for the garden gate.

Then a strange thing happened. No sooner did John's finger lift the latch than a woman came out of the cottage door, and boldly confronting him, told his business "vor all the world as if she could read the mind o' man like a open book."

She was neither old nor thin, but apparently well to do, and natural assurance or practice had made her very voluble.

"Zo you've come at last and not one day too soon if not too late, for it's a hard spell and hard to find the thread, but though the power is strong, strong's the cure. I was waiting for you, John Sprackman, for come you must I knew, to tell o' harm to hoof an' horn, and if somethen izzen zoon done it'll be ruin if not death. Go back an' watch, John Sprackman, an' avore another noon will come a change. Whoever does this work shall come or zend to offer kindness. Come or zend they cannot help, but let me know, John Sprackman, whether avoot, on lags vour, or wi' how many wheels."

Then she shut the door behind her with a slam which John recognized as final. A tabby cat crept into the

window and settled beneath the slanting ray of the morning sun; and John was taken all over with such a trembling that he gladly got back to his horses as quickly as possible.

Then the hogsheads were conveniently arranged, and Ruth started on her errand. The sun peeped over the hedgerows. Each leaf and blade wore a bead of dew, and everything was bright and fresh. Now a field of beans in flower, then a herd being milked in the corner of a pasture, filled the air with fragrance. Nowhere was sadness but in Ruth's heart. Even there it could not hide undisturbed.

As they passed a homestead by the roadside, a young girl, sparkling with pleasure, ran out and put her hand on the tailboard of the wagon.

"Ruth! Ruth! why, where are you going so early?"

"Only to Ilchester for something."

"But I thought you were at Mr. Granger's. It's pleasant in the early morning before it gets so hot. When did you come home? But I say, Ruth—well, I won't mention anything now. But I wish you luck. Good-by, Ruth. I wish you luck."

Once an opulent neighbor, ambling by on horseback, drew rein to say:

"Oh, Miss Upcott! father at home? I wish you'd say, if he should

be passing my way, I should be glad of a word with him. All well at home, I hope. Good-morning."

So the family disaster was still a secret, while her courtship evidently interested the neighborhood. She resented even good wishes now that love was crushed in calamity and pride stifled in jail. She pictured her father broken down with shame and misfortune, and wished to give him consolation if that were possible. She would always obey him in future, if there were a future, which seemed doubtful. She knew his pride, and thought he would never raise his head again.

Outside the town she alighted and crossed the bridge. The prison walls towered above the river bank, and turning to the left she walked beneath their gloomy shadow to the jail door. Summoning courage she knocked and was admitted. Within the entrance a turnkey was standing at the desk making entries. For a moment he did not look up, and Ruth glanced at a copy of rules hanging on the wall. Visitors were to be admitted at nine o'clock, and now it was scarcely eight. Then she read a notice in gilt letters instructing charity how to assist poor debtors, and peered through the bars of a massive iron gate at the flag-

stone pavement before the governor's house.

Presently the scratching of the pen ceased.

"What do you want?"

"Mr. Upcott, if you please."

The man smiled.

"Brought his bail?"

"I—I brought his breakfast."

"It's too early for visitors. Well, you'll know better next time," said the turnkey, opening the huge gate as a favor. "Turn to the right and knock at the door. Ask for the conversation room. Anyone will show you."

It was summer, yet unhealthy moisture oozed from the walls, where ferns were clinging to the crevices. So complete the precautions against escape, the very air seemed heavy and oppressed; the sun, a mere visitor, paid only restricted visits, while the fresh wind of heaven rejoiced in freedom and passed by. "You'll know better next time." These words of encouragement sounded like a knell. The idea of an occasional visitor was evidently unfamilar to the prison official. As Ruth drew near the building which had been indicated, a well known voice greeted her ear.

"And, I say, if you know anything about law, you'll know it can't be

done. I say, it can't be done. I was almost bred a lawyer myself, but my father changed his mind. I say, you can proceed by mesne or by writ, and I've been falsely arrested. Why, I put in an appearance. I say, I put in an appearance—— Come in."

In obedience to the invitation, Ruth entered a room, small and bare, with a stone floor but no fireplace. Her father, seated on a bench, was explaining his position to a group of gentlemen debtors, who listened with sympathy, having all been victims of false affidavits or procedure. An old man, bent and decrepit, was sweeping the floor—a poor debtor eking out the county allowance by a pittance earned in the service of gentlemen debtors—he had run the whole gamut of experience, and no form of arrest was unfamiliar to him.

"*Ne exeat regno*," he piped in a shrill voice.

"What, Ruth! My daughter, gentlemen; I say, my daughter."

The gentlemen debtors bowed with that united grace and dignity acquired only by unmerited misfortune.

"My daughter is residing with Mr. Granger; I say, with the gentleman of whom I spoke. Did your uncle come himself, Ruth? Did Mr.

Granger come himself? I knew I shouldn't have long to wait. You remember, gentlemen, I said I shouldn't have long to wait."

The affection cherished toward him vanished, and her heart hardened. Her mother was broken-hearted, the family respectability wrecked; yet forgetting everyone but himself, his vanity only boasted more loudly, seeking the good opinion of men whose mean appearance aroused her scorn.

"I brought your breakfast," she said haughtily.

"Eh, what? Breakfast? Where is your Uncle Granger, then—I ask, where is he?"

"I do not know. I came alone."

The gentlemen debtors smiled, having heard this sort of thing before.

"Not know? But Mr. Granger must be somewhere. I say, he must be somewhere. But I suppose there are formalities. No doubt, gentlemen, there are formalities. How your mother burnt this pork, to be sure. I say, Ruth, how your mother burnt this pork. There, don't stand about. Spread the little napkin on that corner, and I'll just pick a bone picnic fashion. I say, picnic fashion."

The bone, not being disjointed, proved refractory, and before Eb-

enezer could detach it, a man entered the room waving a paper to dry the ink.

"It's all right, Mr. Upcott. The money's paid. I brought you the receipt."

Ebenezer rose proudly.

"I knew there were preliminaries. I say, I said there were formalities. Is Mr. Granger waiting outside."

"It's a rum go," replied the man. "The plaintiff sent to pay off the money himself."

"What? I say, what? Paid it himself. Then he knows he's done wrong. A rascal. I say, he's found he's done wrong. But this shall cost him a pretty penny before Ebenezer Upcott's done with it. Just hand me my hat? I say, would you kindly hand me my hat? Never mind the basket, Ruth; there's many an unfortunate man here'll be glad with the contents. Here, I say, here's a beautiful piece of pork. Good-morning, gentlemen. I've been falsely imprisoned. I say, I've been improperly incarcerated. But it'll be heard of. I say, this'll be heard of again. Come, Ruth. Don't stand about. I say, good-morning to you, gentlemen."

It was heard again that day many times. As they issued from the prison gate George Biddlecombe was

passing down the street. Seeing the wagon, he had loitered, hoping to speak to Ruth, but Ebenezer, staring disdainfully into space, strode past him, roaring his threats to the world. "I've been illegally arrested by a set of villains—I say, a set of blackguards. But I shall set the law in motion, and it won't stop where it is. I was almost bred to the law myself. I say, my father nearly bound me to the law at one time, but it fell through."

As they crossed the market place people ran out to ascertain what was amiss, and Ruth, frightened and ashamed, dared not glance at her departing lover. Yet she felt sure he must have paid the money. Nor did Ebenezer's excitement abate during his homeward journey. His imprisonment seemed a matter of almost national importance, and believing the county to be full of it, he kept explaining and reiterating even to John Sprackman.

"Oh, no! John Sprackman. You never thought to see your master in jail. I say, you never thought to see Mr. Upcott in jail. But there is villainy in this world. There are people in this world busy in knavish tricks, John Sprackman."

"Noo vear," concurred John Sprackman.

"But they know they've done wrong. I tell you, they know it. You can't arrest — I say, John Sprackman, you can't arrest when I've entered an appearance. That's mesne process, but now we're both in court. I say we're both in court, John Sprackman."

"To be zure; to be zure," said John slowly, never doubting the truth, but only the meaning.

"But they've got a rum fellow to deal with. I say, they've got a rum fellow to deal with, John Sprackman," boasted Ebenezer.

"An' zo they have," agreed John.

"And they'll find that out. I say, they'll soon find that out."

"An' zo they will."

"And they'll see themselves. I say, Miller Biddlecombe 'll see his own folly."

"I'll warr'nt un."

"If he doesn't do so already. But I maintain he's found his error. He's in a pugsy, and I say he's drawing back. Why would any man living run up law expenses to defray them himself next morning? That's not nature, John Sprackman. I say, that's not reason. That's something like hot and cold, sour and sweet, cross and kind all at one time. Would Miller Biddlecombe get up early to do me a kind-

ness if he didn't know he'd done me a wrong? Besides, in law the debt's paid. I say, in law the debt's paid, John Sprackman. And he's not the man to throw away money. I say, he wouldn't give me money out of kindness: he's not the man."

"Never happened," said John, who was sitting on the "reaves" of the wagon. The weather was not so wonderful warm to ride, for there was a goodish wind up, but John broke out all over in a sweat. A man may well feel warm who touches the supernatural. The destroyer of "the little dunkey" stood revealed. Miller Biddlecombe had been witching Ebenezer Upcott.

Mrs. Upcott sat thinking over her troubles, confused and broken down, like a person stunned by a heavy blow. Even the tears in her eyes lacked decision to fall. Uncle Granger had promised to "zee what could be done"; but this assurance was so vague that, to use a phrase of her own, she did "not know what to think or how to look at things."

"Poor Ebenezer," she sighed; "it's only envy because he keeps himself up, that's all. Poor Ebenezer."

The postman had been, and a letter from Sempronia lay unopened on her lap.

"Poor maid," she said, pitying

Sempronia's ignorance of the calamity. "But I suppose I mid zo well zee what she do zay. La, dear! an' we've zent vor Jenny an' all."

Just then the wagon arrived, but Mrs. Upcott did not move. Ruth would bring more troubles soon enough.

But Ebenezer entered the front door like a whirlwind. "Eliza! Eliza! I say, Eliza! Breakfast, Eliza! Here I am, Eliza! Stir about! I've been the victim of villainy—the prey of a false affidavit. Come, come; I'm as hungry as a hunter. I'm as hungry as a hound."

In the first impulse of joy she rushed out to embrace her husband in congratulation upon his return. But he was so full of haste and consideration of himself that her intention failed, and she replied:

"Yes, Ebenezer. At once, Ebenezer, I'm sure."

"What's the letter, Eliza?"

"Why, it's from Sempronia. She's coming home. An' after we've zent vor Jenny an' all."

Ebenezer stamped with impatience. "What? Am I to be saddled with a pack of girls? Times won't stand it. I say, seasons won't admit of it. It's a very good thing Ruth is gone to Uncle Granger's."

Maternal love melted Mrs. Upcott's heart. At any cost Ruth's indiscretion must be hidden from her father. "Massy on me, Ebenezer," she said, "an' if the kitchen vire isn't a'most out."

"Then I can't wait. Business is business, and there are the mowers to look to. I'm not particular. I'll take a crust and go. Anything'll do for me. I say, anything's good enough for me."

Mrs. Upcott bustled to no purpose. He was excited and would not wait, and now, more than his imprisonment, she lamented the insufficiency of his meal.

In the passage he met Ruth. "Mr. Culliford wants to see you, father. I met him this morning."

"He can find me. I say, I suppose he can discover me," said Upcott sharply, and went into the lane.

"Poor Ebenezer!" Mrs. Upcott watched him from the window. In girlhood she had accepted him at his own valuation, and the standard had never depreciated. His boasts were current coin, which, ignorant of their worthlessness, she passed to the next comer. He had not succeeded—true, but that was the times; Ebenezer said so constantly himself. And the seasons were bad also; that was admitted by everybody connected with

land. Neither summer nor winter could be depended upon, and it was clear that nature or the almanac must have gone wrong. But when sun, rain, frost, and snow lose their way and do not keep their appointments, that puzzles the farmer.

"Poor Ebenezer!" What a wealth of simple loyalty the words conveyed.

As Upcott crossed the fields that morning he caught a glimpse of his circumstances in their true perspective. He stood looking at his cattle standing in grass which grew so fast that they could not keep it down. The farm, though small, was miserably understocked, and to every traveler who peeped over the hedgerows scarcity of money must be evident. There are symptoms of poverty which cannot be hidden. How frequently had he pointed them out elsewhere in the most improving manner. Now he realized their presence, and for a moment his blustering vanity melted into cowardice. He could not face the disgrace of poverty.

He was over head and ears in debt. The message just delivered by Ruth was from a creditor, and he cast about for an expedient to supply this present want, but could find none. Hitherto the wild talk of

leaving the country had meant nothing, but now flight seemed a solution of his difficulty. No natural affection bound him to home, and unconscious of his own shortcomings, he blamed his wife's management and the extravagance of his daughters. In the misery of despondency the temptation to desert his family grew strong. But he had no money, no destination, no capacity for earning his own livelihood elsewhere. In this moment of rare insight even his own deficiency became clear to him.

The sound of distant voices and the sharp grating of a whetstone against the scythe recalled his thoughts, and he hurried across the field. Constant to his habit he accused the mowers of idleness, rated them for taking advantage of his absence, loudly asserting that he would stand no trifling.

A rural giant, with straps around his wrists, and yellow trousers, tied at the knee with twine, stopped mowing and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

"Did 'ee zee Mr. Granger, zur?"

"No. Where? When?"

"He went on." The man became engrossed in his work.

"When? I say, when? I ask, how long ago?"

"A little by now." The man

bending over his work could hardly be heard.

"What? Stop, I say, stop. Did he ask for me? Did he go to the house?"

The mower paused, weighing each circumstance with judicial gravity in anxiety not to deceive.

"I do lot he did."

"Well, get on. I say, get on as fast as you can. Don't let me have any nonsense. I say, no loitering about."

"Mäester! Mäester!"

"What is it now? I can't stay."

"Be we to goo into little mead a'ter this?"

"Certainly. Certainly. Push on. I say, I can't stay."

Then satisfaction rippled over the man's face as his comrades exchanged glances and laughed.

At the mention of his distinguished relative, Ebenezer hurried home, full of amateur law and explanations of the false affidavits. Perhaps Uncle Granger might be induced to lend financial aid. But the idea of seizing misfortune by the throat and grappling with it did not occur to Ebenezer. With that fatuity which so often accompanies insolvency he determined to boast of prospective damages, and borrow twenty pounds.

Uncle Granger, in shirt-sleeves,

occupied the stone seat under the shadow of the porch. His red waistcoat was open, his chest expanded by the heat. The inevitable pipe and cup kept him company. The old man waved a stick in congratulation, and Ebenezer considered his affair as good as settled.

"There, there. Zit down," said Uncle Granger.

Ebenezer took the opposite seat, his top-boots a sort of antithesis to Uncle Granger's knee-breeches and hose.

Uncle Granger placed the cup conveniently between them. "There's a wonderful vine swath o' grass to year," he said; but presently added the wise limitation, "Mwost places."

"A wonderful swath, I agree, Uncle Granger; a wonderful swath. But what good's that? I defy any man to live. I say, there isn't meat and drink in the land in these times," said Ebenezer, hiding his face in the cider-cup. "What do you think, Uncle Granger?"

Uncle Granger stared at the roof, then at the blue flag-stones, and reflected.

"Mus' be very warm to walk," he said.

"And so it is. Very warm indeed. I say, this is a fine thing, putting me

to jail. A disgraceful thing! But it's not the last of it."

"Dear, dear!" interrupted Uncle Granger sympathetically.

"Only it'll be the other way about before 'tis finished. I've been unjustifiably taken. But no matter; Biddlecombe has paid already, and he'll have more to pay yet. I say, it's perjury, rank perjury, Uncle Granger. Mind, I don't deny that money is tight. With the country in such a state, any man might find himself tight—temporarily. But I was taken unprepared. All I wanted was time, I say, time to realize. And that is just the difficulty; that's where wisdom comes in—in realizing. But it can't be done, I say, it can't be done at present prices,"

Ebenezer paused for corroboration of this great economic truth; but Uncle Granger scratched his nose with his pipe-stem to promote thought.

"And that's just the difficulty, Uncle Granger. I shall get damages—heavy damages. But you can't get law without money. Money is the mainspring of law and the lever of legislation. And I want you to advance me a few pounds as an accommodation. You know me, Uncle Granger. I say, you know me, and I don't want much—but—well—say

twenty pounds. I say, say twenty pounds, Uncle Granger."

Uncle Granger did not say twenty pounds; he opened his eyes wide, as if experiencing the difficulty of realizing, and stared at the moisture on the stones.

"The vlags do heave. Zign o' fickle weather. Teazen vor haymëaken," he said, rising from his seat.

"And what shall we say, Uncle Granger?" pressed Ebenezer.

"Well, I'll take a vew days to think," he answered, slowly waddling out to look at the sky.

"Exactly. I'll look over. I say, I'll look over."

"Or I'll let 'ee know when I do make up my mind. Yes. There's a vine swath to year, a wondervul vine swath—in zome parts. But I won't keep you, Ebenezer. I'll get on now."

"Nonsense! I say, nonsense! Why, you'll stay to dinner. Eliza! Ruth! Come, I say. Here's Uncle Granger thinking of going."

Mrs. Upcott came running out.

"Now don't 'ee, Uncle Granger! Don't 'ee, to be sure."

"And Ruth isn't ready yet," added Ebenezer.

But no persuasion could induce Uncle Granger to sit down again.

"Ruth! I say, Ruth!"

"Ruth isn't going back," explained Mrs. Upcott. "Not to once."

"Not going back? I say, not going back? Going to desert her Uncle Granger? No, that's not Ruth. I say, that's not Ruth."

"Well, you zee, Mrs. Toop——" Mrs. Upcott, detecting herself making a false excuse, stammered and stopped.

Then the depth of Uncle Granger became apparent. "You zee, Ebenezer," he said, impressively, "two women in house together do breed complications."

"That's true. I say, that's true," replied Ebenezer, who had learned this before the distribution of his daughters.

Presently he followed the little low cart to the brink of the brook. "Then I shall hear from you, Uncle Granger?"

And Uncle Granger, turning slowly round, replied, "Well, mabbe."

"I can't think what Uncle Granger can be thinking o'. To goo wi'out zo much as a mouthful to stay his stomach," said Mrs. Upcott.

CHAPTER XII.

IN DARKNESS.

OLD Tommy White was dead, and Miller Biddlecombe bought the close of pasture and the bit of arable ground. But increased possession brought him no pleasure. When George paid Ebenezer Upcott's debt the old man looked into the chasm between himself and his son, and it seemed impassable. Some eccentricities of youth he could understand, and forgive; that George should fall in love was natural, and Ruth alone to blame; but to trifle with money transactions was an immorality, wild almost to madness. Property and gold possessed for him a being something like life, with claims and rights which all persons should respect; and so, having ceased to covet it, he, nevertheless, bought White's land. It lay so handy that purchase was almost an act of religion.

But George was gone! From his

home, his future, and his heart. Up to this time his solitude had been self-inflicted, and it had never been complete. But suddenly the neighbors ceased coming to his mill. He knew their ways so well, and watched the Toops drive past on their appointed days carrying their custom to Sparkford. Sometimes no one entered the mill-yard on business for a week; and if he had not been rich he must have become ruined. He understood also the unpopularity in which he must be held—the hatred, indeed, which alone could induce these frugal-minded folk to travel further to their own disadvantage. But he did not know that John Sprackman had been telling the most wonderful tales, of how he went to the witch, who told him all he knew before he had so much as a minute to wag his tongue, and put a stronger spell on Miller Biddlecombe, so that he had to send the money that same morning early to pay off his own debt, and let Ebenezer Upcott out of Ilchester Jail. He did not know that the death of "the two sparkèd cows and the little dunkey" lay at his door, and that women called their children from playing on the bridge over the mill-stream for fear that old Biddlecome should look upon them with his evil eye.

Then the solitude became something awful, for the wheel was silent, and the water rushed to waste over the weir. And having nothing to do, he took to sitting by the hatches all day long. It was enough to make a man mad to watch the giddy water always sweeping by and churning up the mud in the pool below. But worse than the waste was the constant thought of that lost opportunity always passing through his brain. Ebenezer Upcott was free—free, in a sort of way, by means of his, Miller Biddlecombe's, money. This feeling of his utter helplessness to injure the people he hated—the fools who had stolen his money and taken away his son—kept gnawing at his heart. He sometimes felt that he could murder Ebenezer Upcott; and he wished that he could hear that Ruth was dead. The certainty that utter ruin must, in the natural sequence of events, befall these people was no solace to him now, so bitterly did he lament the lost delight of encompassing their fall. He used to sit for hours muttering imprecations and evil wishes against Ebenezer. "May he come to beg, an' want, an' be refused relief. May he die in workhouse, an' lie wi'out a stone above his head."

Then his thoughts would wander back to George. "To come in the early morning, as fresh as lying, wi' a silken tongue, to hold me up a fool for folk to glene at." For years he had not loved his neighbors; and yet, humanity is so hard to die! he needs must suffer under the sense of public odium. Once, but only once, when some passers stopped upon the bridge where the high-road crosses the mill stream, and looked at him and laughed, in his impotent anger he cursed George. But, frightened at his own words, he got up hastily and altered the hatch.

It was strange that with all this misery and malice he could not summon force of mind to alter his will. He talked of it constantly. "I'll take a name out of a list, an' leave it to a name that is nothen to me. I'll leave it to a pauper wi' parish pay." This was the expression of the loftiest height of scorn and the deepest depth of contempt that his mind could conceive, and yet he dared not do it. Besides, he saw in his keen way that such a will would certainly defeat itself, and be set aside without difficulty. He could only determine to live on in the useless mill and let it fall into ruin, to put no money out to use, but to eat

the principal, and to let the land go down. This was perhaps the lowest depravity to which a man of his habits and ideas could fall. And yet he must let his dairy, for he could not look after the cows.

Thus the summer passed ; the harvest was exceptionally fine and early, and the following Sunday was to be the Thanksgiving day for harvest-home. It was Saturday evening, and the villagers were flitting to and fro laden with flowers and fruits to decorate the parish church. The yellow-headed Toop drove by with boughs in a light spring cart. His sister, an expansive maiden of five-and-twenty, followed on foot in her short sleeves and open neck—a species of modern Ceres, carrying a pumpkin ; and the village children had all picked posies to lay around the rim of the old stone font.

But Miller Biddlecombe would not have turned his head if the whole pageant of human vanity had passed his door. He got up sick at heart, and went into his house.

There was to be an anthem too ; and the village choir, meaning to show the parish some pretty singing, had worked with zeal. But trebles will hurry and basses do drag, and a tenor either does not strike in soon enough, or will hold on after the rest.

Now, independently, every Camel singer was perfect; that was universally claimed and admitted. But concert music is a species of volley firing, and unless you come in Bang! the effect is lost. And an anthem is a particular thing—a very touchy thing. It is no good to think you can sing an anthem all by yourself, and unless this is recognized it is better to stay at home.

Therefore, when the decorations were finished, there was a practice which lasted quite late; and as the choristers were groping down the steps by the churchyard gate some one noticed a narrow strip of light stretching across the millyard.

"I wonder what wold miller's up to," said one.

"Noo good," replied another.

"Let's zee."

"Now, all goo down quiet an' peep bezide the window blind."

Biddlecombe was sitting in his chintz-covered chair, leaning on the table with his head upon his arms.

"Let's holler an' vrighten un."

"Now, look here. Do it a bit tidy like to make un jump. Let's het it altogether like a 'Glory be.'"

"Now, then. One—two—dree—HEIGH!"

The miller started and raised his

head, staring and confused. Perhaps he had been dreaming; but conscious now that he could be observed, he rose quickly and blew out the candle.

After that evening there was never a light in the mill-house; and after leaving the hatches, if Miller Biddlecombe ever sat up, it must have been in darkness.

CHAPTER XIII.

SEMPRONIA.

THERE is no spur to action so sharp as a point of dignity; and Sempronia, deeply wounded in an altercation concerning one of the keys, unexpectedly returned home. She traveled by coach to a neighboring town, and, still burning with resentment, walked to Marston in the heat of the day, leaving her luggage to be fetched at convenience. Striding like an Amazon along the dusty road, never lagging in the sun, nor loitering in the shade, her glory was that she had unmistakably asserted her independence.

No one ever dared to hint that Sempronia was in error, or might have acted differently. She was right, quite right, and watchful for the merest inuendo to the contrary. Her erect bearing expressed integ-

rity and a consciousness of the accuracy of all her judgments.

Sempronia was tall and severe; severe enough for anything if she had not been commonplace. But there was nothing classical about Sempy, except the name. In personal appearance and disposition she resembled her father, being masterful and overbearing; but in this she gloried, believing any eccentricity of temper explained and redeemed by the affirmation that she was an Upcott. But Sempronia possessed common sense and courage, and, being five-and-thirty, was impatient with frivolity and disaster. She found Mrs. Upcott alone, for Ebenezer, now over head and ears in difficulties, had gone to see Uncle Granger.

"Why, an' if here isn't Sempy. Well, now! Sempy!"

"Yes, mother," said Sempronia; "here I am."

"An' zo you be."

"Yes, I came away at short notice, but I'm an Upcott. I always was."

"An' zo you was."

"And always shall be, I suppose," said Sempronia sharply. "But I don't stand any nonsense. We had a few words about the yellow soap in the corner cupboard, and I said if

things were weighed like a workhouse I'd go at once. That wouldn't do for me."

"Don't 'ee talk o' workhouse, child. I can't abear it."

"Why, what's that, mother?"

"We're ruined, Sempy, or soon shall be. There's one an' another been here an' talked loud, an' your father have a made a mint o' promises to pacify 'em. But there isn't a penny, Sempy, not one, or why didn't he pay instead o' going to jail, as anybody would, you may be sure. We're never been lucky, never, since the day we married an' went to Cadbury. Zomething's always been awry—either the prices or the seasons or the laborers, an' when it wasn't that it was the stock. An' now it's such a wondervul zeason, it's no good to anybody because there's no money left in the country. Ebenezer said so himself. There's nothing to buy with or sell for, an' it's no wonder volk don't get on, the wonder is that any do, Ebenezer told me so himself. And, Sempy, we shall be sold up. And that'll be the end o' all, vor if it isn't zooner 't'll be Michaelmas, every thread an' stick, my poor wold kitchen clock, an' the little copper kittle that mother had come to her by name in a will

from her great-aunt when she was but a baby."

"Well; it has a hole in it," said the practical Sempronia.

"An' zo he have," replied Mrs. Upcott, greatly comforted. For it was a comfort to talk to a person so fearlessly self-reliant as Sempronia, who, apparently unmoved by troubles, rose and lowered the kettle over the fire.

"Yes, Sempy, an' then there's your Uncle Granger, he's quite zour wi' Ebenezer, an' said to Mrs. Toop, who told all Camel volk, that money was a waste on Ebenezer, unless he was whitewashed. An' he hasn't been here for weeks, an' I'm sure I never thought to have a coldness wi' Uncle Granger. But what your vather'll do, nobody knows. I'm sure I don't, for he isn't zo young as he once was; and it's all through Miller Biddlecombe putting him to jail, though I can't think why, I'm sure."

"Because he wanted his money."

"Well, an' perhaps he did, an' yet he paid himself. But that might ha' been respect for Ebenezer after all. Though Ebenezer did explain it and talk about law, but zo many words do really goo to a thing o' that zort that I can't take it in, like; and Ruth

there's never a word to be got out o' edgeways."

"Where is Ruth?"

"I suppwose she's about somewhere, Sempy."

"Ruth! Ruth!" Sempronia shouted out of the front door and out of the back, and after a short search found Ruth in the garden picking fruit.

"Why, Ruth!"

"Well, Sempy!"

Sempronia had cared for Ruth's youth, and loved her like a mother; a disciplinarian mother, who will not stand nonsense or spoil her child by economy in punishment or unwise demonstrations of affection. She kissed Ruth's cheek, a sharp kiss like a postman's knock, which does not wait for an answer.

"Why, how you're altered, child. You're not half what you were," she said, squeezing the girl's arm as if to test the hardness of her biceps.

"Oh, I'm all right."

"Why, you're all eyes and cheek-bones, child."

"I'm glad you've come. Perhaps there'll be a little sense now; and I want to go out."

"You'd better go in," said Sempronia dictatorially.

"I'll tell you, when there's time,"

continued Ruth. "I shan't stay home—I can't."

"Perhaps there won't be a home." The rebuke was severe, but Sempronia had no patience. Like all persons deficient in imagination, she possessed less sympathy than sense. "There, nonsense, child. Of course there will. It will only be one step lower. First 'twas Cadbury, then Lovington, and now we shall rent a dairy."

"Father never will."

"But he must. He'll have to."

And it really seemed probable when Sempronia said so.

They went in the kitchen to Mrs. Upcott, where Sempronia not only made tea, but largely consumed it. The ravages of the sun had browned her high cheek-bones and reddened the summit of her nose. A pale band of the natural yellow of her skin across her forehead, another around her neck, indicated territory protected by her hat and kerchief, and gave a piebald appearance to her honest face.

"Yes," she said, "father may talk as long as he likes, but he'll have to take a dairy."

"Poor Ebenezer!"

"That's all right, mother. But he want's somebody to talk sense,

and tell him straight out he *is* poor Ebenezer."

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Mrs. Upcott.

"But I do," retorted Sempronia, taking an old newspaper from the table. "Why, here's the very thing. John Biddlecombe of Camel wants to let his dairy, unless it's too late."

"Your father couldn't go to 'em, Sempy. Ebenezer couldn't lower hiszelf like that."

"Pack o' nonsense."

"And Miller 'oodent let it to un, if he did."

"Father would have to pay off the debt, of course, and so he ought. Uncle Granger' d have to go bond for the rent. I'd talk to *him*. Biddlecombe will let it right enough to get back his money. In installments, of course."

Sempronia's insight was so clear, her style so lucid, that Mrs. Upcott became easily convinced; when her husband presently returned she greeted him with a smile which was almost cheerful.

Having silently shaken hands with his daughter, Upcott seated himself by the window. His interview had evidently been unsatisfactory, and with his elbow resting on the sill, his

head on his clenched fist, he looked almost dangerous to interrupt. Perhaps he deemed these women-folk unworthy of his confidences.

"Well, father, and what's the outcome?" ventured Sempronia.

"There's no such thing as family feeling. I say, there's no pride left. Your Uncle Granger has insulted me, Eliza; I tell you, grossly insulted me."

Mrs. Upcott began to weep. After so many years it was sad to find herself deceived in her Uncle Granger.

"Well!" said Sempronia.

"He recommended me to rent a dairy. To rent Biddlecombe's dairy. If I can make terms with my creditors, forsooth, he'll guarantee the rent. I suppose, I say, I suppose he wants to see Ebenezer Upcott with his head tucked into a cow's belly. I told him I'd starve."

"You will," said Sempronia.

And Ebenezer seemed unprepared for such terse attack.

"A pretty thing. I say, a very pretty thing to see me hat in hand to the man who has worked my ruin. I never thought much of your Uncle Granger, Eliza, and now I've proved my thoughts right. He's a narrow-minded man, and stingy too. I say,

and very stingy too. He's mean I say, mean."

A thousand kindnesses and little homely attentions had endeared the old man to Ruth, and with more valor than discretion she rushed to his defense.

"He has a right to do what he likes with his own, I should think."

Excited by Uncle Granger's refusal, and perhaps astonished by Sempronia's unexpected presence, Ebenezer had taken no notice of Ruth; but at the sound of her voice he rose from the window-sill in the most unaccountable fury, a fury irresponsible and capable of wild violence. He did not threaten, but anger seemed to overcome and render him dumb. Sempronia instinctively drew closer to her sister, but Mrs. Upcott alone understood what had happened, and threw her arms around her husband, crying:

"Don't, Ebenezer. It's only that wicked old Toop! Don't! She's your own daughter. Don't!"

There was a moment terrible in silence. Then, through his clenched teeth, he hissed:

"I know what she is. She's the talk of everybody—a strumpet."

Ruth sprang to her feet, as if to flee somewhere out of sight—any-

where from such reproach. Then she would have fallen, but Sempronia caught her. And that night a light shone through the window from which Ruth once kissed her hand to George, and Sempronia sat watching by the bedside, receiving the girl's confidence and trying to soothe her into sleep.

CHAPTER XIV.

AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

SOME weeks elapsed, and Ebenezer had come to terms with his creditors. The copper "kittle," dear to the heart of Mrs. Upcott, was not sold, because no one bid for it, and Uncle Granger bought the kitchen clock for a mere song. Uncle Granger managed the whole affair with shrewdness, acquired by the experience of more than threescore years, and the Upcotts had moved from the farmhouse to the cottage on the other side of the road.

Implored by Mrs. Upcott, urged by Sempronia, and constantly stared at by Uncle Granger, Ebenezer had at last consented, in despair, to apply for Biddlecombe's dairy. He was to go that afternoon, but a heavy thunderstorm, with rain in torrents, delayed him until evening. So much

the better ; perhaps he might not be seen.

The rain ceased, but heavy clouds still hid the sky, hastening the approach of dusk. As he tramped along the sodden road heavy with mud, stooping beneath his troubles like an old man, a group of returning laborers, after the hearty manner of those parts, bade him "good-night" ; but he did not answer them. No longer important, he became sullen, still feeling that the world had treated him badly, and blaming Uncle Granger for not helping him to retain his position. He was so broken down that, whether successful or a failure, he felt his errand to be quite hopeless.

Camel street was empty ; the air being chilly, village gossips had forsaken the garden gate to gather around the hearth. Loud laughter came pealing from one of the cottages as he passed, and he quickened his pace as if it were directed against himself.

As he entered the mill-yard Biddlecombe was crossing from the hatches, and waited peering at him through the twilight.

"Ho ! Ebenezer Upcott ! 'Tis you, is it? I shouldn't have expected to zee you here. You've bin a stranger this longish while now. I

can't say I be glad to see 'ee; but I should be glad to see that money—that money you never paid, but had the receipt vor. You didn't get all your debts a-paid that way by all accounts."

"I wanted a word on business, Mr. Biddlecombe," said Upcott gloomily.

"To be sure I didn't place myself on the level of friendship," sneered Biddlecombe. "But you can walk in."

With this ungracious welcome the miller opened the door and stood aside for Upcott to enter. In the kitchen it was so dark that the oak dresser was scarcely distinguishable from the wall, and without a word the miller took his tinder-box from the shelf and began to strike a light. The process was long, for his hand trembled with excitement, and Ebenezer's heart sank. The snicking of the flint and steel sounded hard and vicious; and when at last Biddlecombe bent down to blow the tinder into a glow the gladness of mockery seemed to gleam in his eyes.

"You can zit down," he said, when at last a candle was lighted.

Ebenezer obeyed.

"You want to let your dairy. I hear you want to let your dairy, Mr. Biddlecombe."

"I did. But minds do change.

I don't hold every day alike. Why, *you* ha'n't bin able to play all one tune, Mr. Upcott. You don't zing so gay a zong as you did a few years agone, if my hearing is good."

"I've had bad luck—very bad luck. What with the times and troubles I'm a broken man. I say, I'm a broken man."

Upcott's voice was low, and he sat staring on the floor as if never again to look the world in the face. The repetition once so aggressive now sounded pathetic, but the miller gleamed on him with pitiless eyes. Apart from personal hatred Upcott was just the sort of fool he could not tolerate, and he enjoyed a bitter satisfaction in trifling with him.

"Yes, Mr. Upcott, zur. You've got your cares, if all that's told may be believed. And zo many to provide vor too. 'Tis a kindness to think o' my wants at zuch a time. I ought to be very much obliged to 'ee, I'm sure."

"I should be glad with the offer, Mr. Biddlecombe——"

"Why, 't'ud never suit 'ee, Mr. Upcott, zur. 'T'ud never suit 'ee at all. You an' *your* family couldn't live out o' zuch a little place. Why, there idden rooms enough in the house. At best 'tis no more than a cottage. You can't know it, Mr.

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Upcott, zur. Why, you'd be packed like pigs in a pen."

"Yes," said Ebenezer, taking this trifling too seriously; "'tis a come down; but the poor can't pick and choose. I say the poor can't be proud."

"No, no. 'Tis only a vool that's proud wi' riches. But you haven't a-paid your way zo fur, Mr. Upcott, zur. 'Tis one o' my maxims—rent must be paid. A man can't well distrain on nothin'. Not very well, Mr. Upcott, zur."

"The rent would be secure. That would be safe. Mr. Granger will be bond for the rent. And I should pay off the debt. I say, I would pay back the debt."

In the face of this trivial opposition, Ebenezer spoke eagerly, feeling that under no circumstances could a more desirable tenant be forthcoming. But the miller only smiled pitilessly. Just when the thing had seemed hopeless, here was this man whom he hated dependent for bread upon his favor. What a fool he must be to believe the granting of his request possible? And as the advantages of such an arrangement, the security of Uncle Granger and the payment of the debt, became clear, the joy of refusal became more intense; for in pro-

portion to the sweet happiness of disinterested kindness is the fierce delight of disinterested hate. All the bitterness, the disappointment, the loneliness of a lifetime were concentrated in his reply. The miller had been playing with his victim, and now he pounced upon him.

"An' do you think I do want a fool for a tenant, a fellow who let plenty drough his fingers like corn drough a sieve, a empty head wi' more words than readship. You tossed your head, Gentleman Upcott like one blade higher than t'others in a field o' wheat, on' there come a puff o' wind—an' what be now? A straw! A thing o' nothing! What be you an' your maidens to me that I should wish 'ee well? Gentleman Upcott, did I say? Glad enough to be Dairyman Upcott, zimmy-zoo. You'll find things different now you be down. When trust is a-tainted, creditors do hover round like flies. An' wants'll buzz about your head—want this an' want that—an' worrit, an sting, until you be zo lean as a hay-rake. No. You've a-took things easy, but when your bones be stiff you'll come to a hard bed. An' I be glad o' it. Shall I tell 'ee what you've done—you an' yours? You've come between George an' me, an' cut me off a

lonely man. An' you struck the boy—an' took his money. I've thought o' it early an' late, morn an' night; and do 'ee think I'd have 'ee upon the land yere to mind me o' it day by day. Not if you paid the rent ten times, an' were starving to boot. As God's in Heaven, not if you were dying, an' my own life hung on the word."

His words came with increasing rapidity and vehemence. With this unexpected opportunity for speech, the flood-gates of his passion were suddenly opened, and the pent-up malice, begotten of weeks of brooding, poured forth. And with the expression of this long accumulated force of contempt and indignation his anger grew to a climax and choked his utterance. He glared upon Ebenezer, and repressed an inclination to strike him.

Upcott rose. Yes, he was a discredited and broken man. His pride had proved a green, unseasoned staff, untrustworthy to lean upon in the rough paths of trouble. He had none of the self-respect which carries a man through difficulties. With bowed head and without a word he turned slowly toward the door.

"Aye. Take an' goo. Volk'll call 'ee pauper one o' these days."

These words ringing in his ears,

Ebenezer lifted the latch and silently let himself out. The miller's attack not only formulated, but proved the disrespect surrounding him, and he slunk away like a broken-spirited dog which has been beaten.

In the yard he stood a while, confused and wonderstruck. The moon had risen. The tempest had passed over; but it was the time of equinox, and fragments of hurried cloud were driving across the sky. The idea of flight to avoid shame was familiar to him, but he had formed no plan nor thought of any destination. No, he could not face the smiles of former neighbors, nor note the whispers in which men lightly tell the tale of misfortune. It was impossible to return to Marston. But whither to go, or what to do or hope for? It seemed that there was nowhere—nothing.

He stood hesitating in the clear moonlight. A jet of water bright as silver was leaping over the head of the hatch. Standing thus, perhaps someone would see him. Then, fancying he heard the sound of footsteps on the road, with an instinct toward secrecy, he stepped back to hide himself in the gloomy shadow of the mill.

When Upcott was gone Biddlecombe sat by the hearth, nursing his anger. His triumph had been unex-

pected and sweet. Yet now it seemed so insufficient. There was justice in the refusal to permit a means of livelihood to the man he loathed. The feeling that it stood within his right—a right well earned by years of work and saving—seemed to detract from the completeness of his triumph. The miller kept repeating his words, amending and strengthening them in imagination. Taunts, sharp sayings which might have wounded more deeply, unthought of at the time, now crowded into his brain, and their bitterness increased his appetite for wrath. And Upcott had sat there, silent as a block, thus proving the inadequacy of the rebuke.

"The fool!" he muttered.

Aye, the fool! If a perception of human folly and its consequences could make a man wise, Miller Biddlecombe had learned the whole secret of happy life. But age had brought only solitude, and prudence was ending in futility. In a fever of restless agitation he began to walk about his room; but the air seemed close and oppressive, unequal to supply the vitality demanded by his emotion and excitement. It was a longing for fresh air which induced him to complete his interrupted errand to the hatches.

Everything was still. For a mo-

ment the wind had lulled, and the moon shone calmly between the ragged silver-edged clouds drifting across the sky. The mill, the outline of the wheel, the pollard willows were all in shadow, but the light fell clearly on the wall and the flat stones below the hatches. The miller stood refreshing himself in the cool night air.

Suddenly from the mill-pool came a scarcely articulate cry, half fear and half appeal, like the moan of some animal in misery. He listened. Were these fools again playing him some prank? Were they stealing his poultry, or meddling with the stock in the ground beyond the stream?

Again the sound was faintly repeated.

It came from the river, and Biddlecombe, rushing forward, peered into the deep pool. On the dark water he could distinguish Upcott's upturned face, pale and white in the moonlight. One hand clutched a plant, a mere weed growing from a crevice in the wall, and without crying for help the man held fiercely, clinging in spite of himself to the life he had sought to throw away.

Their eyes seemed to meet, and Upcott moaned. He did not speak, perhaps scarcely saw the miller. But Biddlecombe felt neither pity

nor surprise. The vision of a drowning enemy had become so familiar to his reverie that now the fact scarcely seemed strange. Hatred of Upcott and scorn for mankind, that moment attained their consummation. He did not reflect, but the possibilities of the situation lay before him with wonderful clearness. A touch, a mere ripple of the water, and this man must sink into the deep.

Yet he could not touch him. With murder in his heart, still he could not commit so definite an act of murder. Then it flashed upon him that, if the hatch were lifted, the movement of the stream must break that precarious hold and Upcott would be drowned. The water was high and raising rapidly from the recent storm: the act natural and wise under ordinary circumstances. Who should say that he had seen him? The water was his; the hatch his, and the man had drowned himself.

At that moment a cloud obscured the moon, and the face faded out of sight. Perhaps it had sunk. He could not tell. The doubt seemed almost to satisfy his conscience, as if, even in the final judgment, he might escape on a technicality. In a sort of frenzy he seized the crow-

bar. The act was almost involuntary, like the movement or word which sometimes escapes one at the moment of some sudden perception. He raised the hatch to its full height and the water went rushing down in a torrent.

Then the moon shone again between the clouds, and he saw that Upcott was not there. But the sudden impulse had expended itself and left him free to realize what he had done. A strange fear seized on his imagination, that this crime could in no wise lie hidden. But it was not fear which made him peer down into the water, searching in vain for some trace of Upcott's whereabouts. It was a wild hope that he might yet save his soul from the burden of his crime. It flashed upon his mind that some belated villager passing the back-stream, so long parched with drought, might notice the unexpected flood. The rising water would not justify such wholesale waste, nor the miller's recent carelessness agree with such forethought. Besides it would prove his presence there at that time. But this vague fear of detection was nothing to his wild instinct toward the reversal of his crime, as he withdrew the bar, letting the heavy hatch fall with a dull thud. Then the pool settled into its

usual stillness, and there was nothing to be seen.

It was done beyond recall. The sense of this dazed him, and he stood motionless— hopeless— helpless— so broken that his lips quivered and he cried. Beside the wall lay an ash pole used for clearing rubbish from the hatch. He took it up and groped in the black water childishly—without sense or intention. Then thoughts came rushing into his brain in wild tumult. What should he do? Yet none had seen! But it would come to light—it would come to light. He must go indoors and wait —to bed, or they might suspect. No one came there now, and it would be three days before—— Then he must find it himself; and nobody would dream. But God knew! And perhaps Hannah! He turned toward the house. He would go in and lock the door. Midway across the yard he stopped. The Upcotts might send by night to inquire if——

An irresistible fascination drew him back.

He had looked over the wall, and now he would cross to the other side to see if he could find anything there. Then he glanced into the hatch hole before descending upon the slippery stones, and lo! straight before him was the body of Upcott, stranded on

the sloping ledge while passing through upon the flood. The eyes, wide open, seemed to stare at him; the lips were parted as if in speech. The miller's anger had all fled, leaving only a sense of horror. Too late, he would have given worlds to undo the deed. He clambered down to Upcott's side, and, overcoming his fear, took the cold wet hand in his. Upcott was dead. Dead! The idea of death had never before been brought home to Biddlecombe. He had *lost* Hannah. She had been taken from him. Thus he always thought and spoke of her now, sometimes with indignation against the power which dispossessed him, never doubting that she lived elsewhere, never really free from a belief in her presence. But this man seemed dead in another way. Dead, like an autumn leaf or anything which has once lived but now is nothing. It seemed that the same complete destruction must some day inevitably overtake himself. Then he felt inexpressible remorse, and pity more pitiable because it could not be expressed. He rubbed the helpless hand, and half lifted half dragged the lifeless body toward the bank. Then he began to speak, as if in the hope of arousing it.

"It's all right, Mr. Upcott. Mr. Upcott, it's all right. You mid go

in to once. What you say is right. We've known each other for years. There's no difference between us, an' the luck'll change."

Then he wept at his own folly for talking to a dead man. Nothing could ever be right now. He shuddered to see how limp was Upcott's neck, and he placed the head more easily and removed the sodden neckcloth.

It made him start to find the dead man gasp. The dread of detection was so strong that he feared Upcott might arise to accuse him. Then he thrust his hand beneath the waistcoat and felt the fluttering heart. Yes, Upcott lived.

"Help! help! He's still alive! Help!"

He listened. Heard a door open in the village. Then the neighbors came rushing to his repeated cries for "Help!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE WAY OF PEACE.

TO borrow a phrase from Mrs. Toop it was "after dark," but a young woman was loitering on the causeway by Marston Corner. Evidently expecting someone, sometimes she looked in one direction and sometimes in the other, as if doubtful whence he would come. At last a young man came hurrying along the Rimpton road. The girl turned, and walked slowly away. The man ran forward with the impetuosity of love, overtook her, and threw his arm around her neck:

"Ruth!" he cried.

"George Biddlecombe! It's me," replied the young woman, with uncalled for severity.

Now, one of the most embarrassing things in life is to expect Ruth and inadvertently embrace Sempronia, and

George was already a little out of breathe. "I'm very sorry, I'm sure. I mean—I thought—I beg your pardon. I hope no offense," he blurted out.

Sempronia sternly admitted that she supposed that there was no harm done.

"Now, let us have no nonsense, George Biddlecombe," she said. "I came because Ruth couldn't. Though I don't know that she would if she could."

"I hadn't heard she was ill."

"Oh, she's all right! You needn't worry yourself about that."

Sempronia, remembering she was an Upcott, spoke quite snappishly. She had heard the whole story from Ruth: how they loved, and met; promised eternal fidelity, and afterward parted with the word "never" lying as a gulf between them. This, on the face of it, was ridiculous; but Sempronia wished to ascertain whether there was any sense beneath. After her fashion she would inquire into George's intentions, and either have it on or have it off. That was her idea—no nonsense. So, having received one morning a letter, addressed, *Miss Upcott*, but beginning, *Dearest Ruth, my Angel*, and imploring an appointment; she sent it back inscribed, *Tuesday night at Mars-*

ton Corner, like a bill of exchange duly accepted.

"Well, George Biddlecombe."

Now, making love by proxy is no simple matter at the best of times, and Sempronia's opinion of his suit had never been expressed.

"Did Ruth ask you to come?" he faltered.

"Oh, dear no! I didn't ask her. Let us hear what you've got to say for yourself first," was the business-like reply.

George was embarassed, and cleared his throat, and beat his gaiter with his ground-ash stick; so Sempronia helped him.

"I suppose you've heard, George Biddlecombe, that we've all been sold up."

"Well, I heard——"

"Oh, you needn't make any bones about it. A fact's a fact, and this one's as big as a bill-poster. Father's gone to ask for Miller Biddlecombe's dairy. There's no money to Ebenezer Upcott's daughter, but you knew that before, I should think."

"I never thought o' it. Never. I'm getting on. I had a few poun' o' my own, an' I bought a few heifers worth the money, and zold 'em again the same day. You zee 'tis all in zeeing when a thing is worth the money, an' I'm keeping my eye on

a little mill, by the time the man goes out, an' then——"

Now this was practical, and appealed to Sempronia's matured judgment.

"And you mean it?"

"Wi' all my heart," said George Biddlecombe, and it sounded so.

"Then why not come in like a man and say so?"

The argument was unanswerable; they had now reached the cottage, and Sempronia opened the door.

"Here's George Biddlecombe, mother, come to ask for Ruth."

Mrs. Upcott had never felt so flustered, in all her life; there was nothing for supper, and what would Ebenezer say? "Massy! There, Ruth, turn the wold cat out o' little armchair. Will 'ee please to zit down, Mr. Biddlecome?"

Then Sempronia called Mrs. Upcott away on some mysterous business, and George and Ruth were left alone.

It went to his heart to see her looking so thin and pale; and he read the complete downfall of the Upcott fortunes on the bare cottage walls. But he had not vanity enough to guess that love had given her more pain than poverty ever could; and the importance of the Upcott

family still represented something to his mind.

"Be still o' the same mind, Ruth?" he inquired in a whisper, although he pressed her to his heart.

She only held his hand the closer.

"Then why not marry to once? I'd make a home, no fear. You'd never want, Ruth, if God should gi'e me health—but what's that?"

There was quite a hubbub of voices in the road before the cottage, and Ruth quickly freed herself from George's embrace.

"Is that father come home angry?" she asked, nervously.

"Why, 'tis quite a parliament," said George, opening the door.

And so it was, for many of the neighbors had pressed into the passage, where John Sprackman was pouring forth his native English with a volubility worthy of a great occasion.

"That's right enough. He wer' amwost zo dead as a nail. Doctor zed vive seconds mwore an' missus here'd 'a' bin a widder-'ooman. That's right enough. Zo true as the light. I chanced to be to Camel-town an' zeed it. They hauled un out, an' carr'ed un in, an' he looked more like a drownded rot 'an a man. I shall never see the like again, if I do live to be a hunderd. An' doctor

stratched un out, an' worked his arms vor all the world like a pump-han'le. An' doctor he bid 'em stan' back. An' then he gasped; an' then he gröaned. An' doctor he scratched his head, an' let t'others pumpy while he did look at un, an' that did zim to bring un roun' like. An' when they'd a-worked the life back into un, like, doctor blooded un wi' a little skiver thing he took out o' his pocket, like. An' then they put un to bed, an' doctor he zet un to sleep zo zound as a top. An' they zend I to zay he wer' so right as a trivet, an' you werden' to think nothen at all about un, because he mus'n't be disturved. An' Miller Biddlecombe zot there like a man a-mwost dazed, like, a zayen, 'Jarge! Jarge!' Zo he zed. 'Jarge! Jarge!' That's right enough. Zo they've a zend to vetch young Jarge in a hoss an' trap, by all accounts."

"But George is here," cried Sempronia.

"Then there's a man outside'll drive un over there right. Or was, I should say, for that's noo lie."

"Oh, my poor man! my poor Ebenezer! Let *me* go, young George," sobbed Mrs. Upcott.

"No. You stay, mother, and I'll walk over," said Sempronia firmly.

When George arrived at the mill,

he found a group of neighbors standing around the door. They had assisted at the recovery of Ebenezer and carried him upstairs, but then retired out of habitual shyness of the miller. The village sexton had undertaken to watch Ebenezer through the night. The people stood aside to let him pass, and George, entering the kitchen, found his father sitting in the familiar chintz-covered chair.

"You be come to bide, George?" cried the old man eagerly, pointing to the oak settle.

George took his accustomed place on the opposite side of the hearth, on which the fire was burning brightly, and they sat thus the whole night through, for Ebenezer occupied the miller's bed.

They did not talk much. At intervals old Biddlecombe threw out a remark; but it was no attempt at conversation—only the old habit of thinking aloud.

"Do rust the heart out lying out o' use alone. 'Tis a dark house wi' only one face 'ithin the walls. And what good when we be gone?"

Once he looked up from his brooding, with the old shrewd look but bereft of its malevolence. He had evidently arranged the future in his thoughts quite clearly.

"At nine pound a cow, an' let the old debt goo. 'Tis noo debt what's paid in law. An' we won't bother Mr. Granger to be bond. 'Tis better that way too, for the maid could never manage a dairy. An' I'll goo into the cottage, and George can have the mill. He can keep her a lady upon what I've done. She need never to soil her hands. An' that vlat-vooted one, she they do call Zempy, 'll be just the one for the dairy. Let's all have peace—let's have peace, I say, or I shall goo to the grave weak-witted."

Sempronia did not come until nearly breakfast-time. A rapid cross-examination of John Sprackman satisfied her that there was nothing to gain by traipsing two mile in the dark; so she stayed with her mother and walked over in the early morning. She cooked the bacon and set the plates just as if she were quite at home. Then the sexton came downstairs and said that Mr. Upcott was awake and talked of getting up.

"Zit down," said the miller quietly. "Please to zit down."

The sexton said he would just walk over to look at the hatches.

And Isaac Toop also that morning left the boy to drive back the cows from milking, and walked across the

mill-yard to assist his imagination by gazing upon the hatches.

Uncle Granger, too, who had heard the news, drove over accompanied by Mrs. Toop, and pulled the little low cart up opposite the hatches.

Gradually the relatives dropped in until there was quite a crowd.

Then Miller Biddlecombe went out to the door, bareheaded, and the wind blew about his long gray hair.

"Now, please to walk in. All please to walk in, an' welcome."

They didn't so much mind if they did, and the kitchen became so crowded that Sempy sent George upstairs for the bedroom chairs.

"Ah! Miller Biddlecombe," laughed the sexton, who was a sad wag, "you've done I out of a job. When the water's at the weir, 'tis seven-foot-six by the wall, sheer and smooth as a grave new-dug. All Camel wi' cart-ropes would ha' been nothing wi'out the miller's wit."

"Noo other man'd ha' thought o' it—till next day," said Toop, solemnly scratching his crown to promote speech. His words were always inadequate, but you never could mistake his meaning. "And I be terrible sorry that ever I—that ever I should ha' broke your peck-measure, Mr. Biddlecombe."

"And glad am I, wi' all my heart,"

chimed in Mrs. Toop, with a more pinched expression than usual, "that all disagreeables should appear to be over, and young George back; and here is Miss Ruth Upcott, as large as life, driving up to the door, and her mother too, which is nothing but right."

A neighbor had lent Mrs. Upcott a pony cart, but her hands were all of a tremble, and Ruth had been forced to drive.

"Bless you, Miller Biddlecombe," sobbed the poor woman, taking the miller by both hands. "God bless you, for your kindness to my good man. I used to think you were hard. But I were wrong ever to harbor the thought. Of course you wanted your money. I see that now. Bless you for saving my poor man's life. But I'll go an' see Ebenezer at once. Poor Ebenezer! he must ha' been lost in the dark or dazed in the moonlight."

The miller answered not a word; but withdrew his hands and hobbled back to his chintz-covered chair, Sempronia gave up her seat at table by George's side to Ruth; and somebody made room for Sempy by the window, as it happened, next to the sandy headed Toop.

"Now, shall I tell 'ee what I do think?" interposed Uncle Granger,

amidst the tumult of praise which so greatly bewildered the miller.

The relatives all sat up, and Mrs. Toop crossed her arms. The moment seemed to have come at last when Uncle Granger was going to give them something to hold on by.

"Do, Uncle Granger!" cried Ruth.

"Do now, Mr. Granger," chimed in the others.

"Then I do think," said Uncle Granger, slowly breaking the expectant silence, "that when a man an' a maid do come to hold han's under the table-cloth, 'tis a-most time to put in the banns."

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